

# CULTURE, VALUE, AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JOEL ROBBINS

• MINNA RUCKENSTEIN •

Joel Robbins, the Department Chair of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego, revisited Helsinki in the fall of 2008. During his visit he gave a paper at a workshop titled *Dumont and the Global Order*—arranged by Professor Jukka Siikala and the Finnish Centre of Excellence in Global Governance Research—and agreed to be publicly interviewed in a discussion series arranged by the Finnish Anthropological Society. Joel Robbins is always a much awaited guest at the University of Helsinki. He is a brilliant speaker and approaches research questions with unusual clarity and insight; in 2007 Robbins was the recipient of his University's Academic Senate Distinguished Teaching Award.

The discussion, titled *Anthropology matters*, was held before an audience that included quite a few students as well as faculty. The interview which preceded general discussion was conducted by Minna Ruckenstein, President of the Finnish Anthropological Society, and has been transcribed, lightly edited to improve readability, and appears below. During the course of the discussion, Robbins talked about his research among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, touching on issues of Christianity and cultural change. Given the theme of the conference he was attending, particular attention was given to the ways in which Robbins has used Louis Dumont's work for theorizing culture, value and globalization. Theorization is in many ways at the heart of what Robbins is aiming at in anthropology; he is currently the co-editor of the journal *Anthropological Theory*. Yet, his project of theorization is firmly tied to an ethnographic project; he is committed to a study of cultural difference from which all of us can learn.

Minna Ruckenstein (MR): You work at San Diego, California, and the United States is therefore one frame of reference to your being an anthropologist. How do you position yourself within the academic anthropological community in the United States? Would you say you have an identity as an American anthropologist?

Joel Robbins (JR): I was trained at the University of Virginia; in the United States you have a lot of graduate schools to choose from, so you write them, asking them for an application, and they send you back a form letter along with all the materials to apply. University of Virginia sent a very cheeky sort of letter that said: "We are not now, nor do we ever intend to be, an American department of anthropology. We see ourselves as British and French." Victor Turner was alive and sort of the eminent presence at the University of Virginia when I requested that information. He had died by the time I started graduate school, but he was the British side. Many of the others had studied with Lévi-Strauss and saw themselves as French in inspiration, and they had almost no interest in defining themselves in the tradition of American cultural anthropology.

And, as the result of that training, I probably never felt very centrally placed in American anthropology. I have always been kind of slightly askance to the American anthropological scene, but I have enjoyed making it a project for myself to try to figure out what I can

contribute from that position. It actually has been helpful because, while a lot of other people of my generation sound roughly the same as each other, I could not sound the same even if I tried!

MR: Another important place for you is in Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, 390 people. Do they make a village?

JR: Seven different villages, which they find very distinct. But it is pretty compact.

MR: You started fieldwork there in the beginning of 1990s. What was your first fieldwork like?

JR: It lasted over two years; it is very hard to get to Urapmin and the language was not something you can study at home. So once I got there I stayed there. The thing that really marked my fieldwork, as I think happens to a lot of people but maybe not as radically as it happened to me, is what I came to study and what I ended up studying were very radically distinct. I had gone there to study secrecy, which had been known to be very important to their religious system. A bit like the Baruya studied by Godelier, but on steroids. Very hyped up with lots of different levels of initiation; all kinds of rules about secrecy, men of different ages having different cosmologies than men of other ages and all men having different cosmologies than women. All maintained through secrecy. And I wanted to study how that secrecy affected Urapmin ideas about knowledge and about communication in everyday life.

I arrived, only to find that the Urapmin had all converted to a charismatic form of Christianity, a type of Christianity in which people become possessed by the Holy Spirit and are given gifts of healing and prophecy. A part of their Christianity is that they are very committed to telling the truth as often as they can. They say that before ‘everything was kept hidden’ but now ‘everything is put into the open, into the clear’. I spent quite a bit of time trying to see if I could recover my old project: I had been warned before I left that there might be a few Christians in Urapmin, but just to ignore them. It took me a while to discover that ‘a few’ equalled 390. But of course, there was no anthropological—really anthropological—study of Christianity for me to fall back on.

MR: It has been an important project for you to define an anthropology of Christianity.

JR: Absolutely. Part of the intellectual side of my fieldwork was realizing it wasn't just that I had to change my project, but I had to change my project to a subject for which there was no conversation I could plan to join. What counts as data about Christians? What am I going to bring home to convince people the Urapmin are really Christians and not just ‘traditional’ Urapmin people underneath? I had to make up answers to those kinds of questions on the fly and that was the most wrenching part of my fieldwork.

MR: Was it disappointing when you realized that you had to go to church with the people instead of listening to their arcane stories?

JR: The short answer is yes. You sit in church, you can be very angry asking how this happened to these people. But at the same time, as my fieldwork went on, I increasingly became excited; Christianity is so important to them. If you care about these particular people as people, this is what you have to study about them.

MR: If we move from a geographical map to an intellectual map, who would you include in your intellectual biography?

JR: Who would I include? My adviser Roy Wagner was a tremendous influence on me, along with Fred Damon. Fred Damon is another person who is perhaps less in the mainstream in the United States, but seems to be more centrally placed and widely known in Europe. Through those two the biggest encounters of my graduate life were Lévi-Strauss, Dumont, and Sahlins. And, actually, Marx, who has only been integrated on some fairly abstract levels but is there. But it was actually Roy Wagner who, when I first went in and told him that I had read Dumont and found that he didn't teach me anything Lévi-Strauss hadn't already told me, said: "No, actually you're wrong. Dumont is a dialectical thinker. Go back and read it again." And I am still sort of doing that. Those have been the biggest intellectual presences in my life and behind that, particularly the French tradition: Durkheim, Mauss, leading into Lévi-Strauss, Dumont, and Sahlins.

MR: What about intellectual enemies? Do you have enemies you are fiercely arguing against?

JR: I told you that I am generationally askance. So there are a lot of people who I find think differently than I do. I came back from the field, and the dominant discourse then, in American anthropology at least, was the study of resistance—the notion that, mostly, social life was made up of people trying to dominate one another any way they could and producing cultural structures and other things as part of the project of domination. And then people trying to see if they could prevent other people from dominating them, and making counter-structures as part of that project. That was what people were treating as the model social relationship. I found all of that extremely foreign to my interest in social life. I found it hard to imagine that this is truly the general human condition everywhere and in every relationship. I also found it a theory that didn't discriminate very much between different places, that didn't see different places as organized socially in different ways, so it was pretty homogenizing.

It became very quickly clear that that theoretical tradition didn't really have a major theorist that you could fight against; it was more of a current of thought. I suppose James Scott would be the person who people most liked to cite if they were going to cite somebody. And Foucault and Bourdieu and in a sense Ortner were important to this trend of thought, though in each case their thinking went well beyond it. But it was hard to find a clear theoretical statement that laid out this whole vision and that one might directly argue against.

Another big piece of the resistance puzzle, I suppose, are the Comaroffs, who for me became much more significant figures because they have a very sophisticated way of looking at missionized Christian populations. When I came home from the field people said to me "Okay, you're studying Christianity. It is about Protestants; it must be a Comaroff project." I could never find very much in the Comaroffs' work that could help me with what I was

trying to do and I became convinced, after reading them carefully, that, in fact, in extremely complicated and subtle ways, they've managed to write about a thousand pages on the mission project without really telling us much about Christianity; their contention is always that the Tswana people didn't understand Christianity, weren't very interested in it, resisted it, and that even the missionaries themselves—being kind of uneducated and working-class—didn't really understand Christianity either. What the missionaries understood was the capitalist system they were a part of, and so what they were really doing was teaching, indoctrinating the Tswana into capitalism. The work of the Comaroffs is enormously sophisticated and you can learn a lot about cultural contact from it, but it actually wasn't very much about Christianity. I found articulating that argument productive in terms of being able to look at what really sophisticated people do when they are edging Christianity to the side of the anthropological project.

MR: You already mentioned Dumont, who is often thought of as an India scholar, but for you he is primarily a social theorist. You have insisted that Dumont is an important reference for anthropologists, even though fewer anthropologists read him these days. Binaries such as holism/individualism, can they be overcome, do they even exist in Dumont?

JR: Yes, the binarism exists in Dumont. That binarism is also there in Roy Wagner. It is also there in Durkheim. It is there in a lot of people I like. And we could talk more about the power of those kinds of binarisms in making anthropology a critical project. I think what all of these people do is emphasise difference really extensively to get critical leverage on their 'home side' of the binary. And I think you do not want to ignore the importance of Dumont's ability to do that, you know? Those of you who teach will discover that he's actually very powerful in the classroom, even with very young students because those kinds of binarisms capture the imagination. They allow people to get a perspective on themselves that if you're being infinitely subtle all the time, people can't always do, if that makes any sense.

So the binarism is there. Most of the great social theorists had one of these kind of binaries: Tönnies with *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* and Durkheim with mechanical and organic solidarity and Marx with 'use value' and 'exchange value'. It is harder with Weber to know exactly what the binary is, but there is certainly something like 'less rational' and 'more rational' implied in his notion of rationalization—not to mention his distinctions between different kinds of rationalities. And the social scientific game, certainly in anthropology, will always in part consist of expanding those binaries or pushing them as far as they can go, and then collapsing them.

But it is only interesting to collapse them if you've pushed them first. And then once they are collapsed, the movement comes to separate them again. Chris Gregory did something very productive with that in the 1980s with the opposition between the gift economy and the commodity economy. Many people then made very big anthropological careers collapsing that binary, including Marilyn Strathern. But if [Gregory] had never pulled the two sides of the binary apart in the first place, we'd never have had the impetus that allows this theoretical work of collapsing them to flourish: this figuring out ways to put them back together. Strathern is extremely complicated with this binary stuff, too, but she does not completely put it aside, either.

Like all major figures, there is a lot of complexity and subtlety in Dumont. He leaves doors open to do something other than that binarism; he actually says all the important values you could ever identify in any culture are probably there in every society. Not every culture picks them up and elaborates them, makes them self-conscious, makes them projects for people, but they are all there. Some of them are what he calls residual: they are unrecognized, they are not thought about. If you read Dumont closely enough, you realize that the binarism is not a straightjacket. It is a form of classification that lets you start comparison. It is not where you have to end up.

MR: You talked about Dumont's notion of ideology as culture. What is your definition of culture?

JR: Definitions in the social sciences are theories—George Homans said that and I believe that. Nobody should be fooled that a definition is somehow a description of reality. I think cultures are made up of values and ideas. If you are Sahlins, you call the ideas categories. And practices are governed by ideas, or shaped by ideas. You can get other things in under that definition, but the simplest would be: cultures are values and ideas.

This is what Dumont says that culture is, too. But he talks about 'ideology' rather than 'culture'. Germans developed the notion of culture as a way of fending off French notions of civilization, which were universal and which, of course, the French most fully realized. And in response the Germans said: "No, no, no, there are these things called cultures, and that is what people really fundamentally are shaped by. And everybody's got one." They didn't necessarily say they are equally good, but they did say their culture is at least as good as French culture.

Because of this you never get anywhere talking about culture in French anthropology: Lévi-Strauss never talks about it, Godelier does not talk about it. It is a German term, so Dumont uses ideology. In American cultural anthropology, 'ideology' really has to mean a self-interested representation of the way the world is. Ideology has to benefit some people over others, and I do not think that is the right starting point—or at least it is not what Dumont means by the term. So I don't take up Dumont's use of 'ideology', but replace it with 'culture', which in the American cultural anthropological setting at least communicates better what he is talking about.

MR: Dumont says that culture does not constitute the entire social domain. Why do you think this is an important notion?

JR: I think this makes Dumont actually quite different from American cultural anthropologists, even as there are ways in which he is close to them. Strong American versions of cultural anthropology, at least, tend to assume, to twist a phrase of Geertz's, that it is culture all the way down: that culture constitutes everything, and whatever is not culturally given does not exist or isn't in play. If you do not have a cultural understanding of something, then it just isn't part of social life.

This also means that reality, for American cultural anthropologists, tends to be culturally constituted. The strong versions of cultural analysis and cultural relativism tend to argue that there may be a world out there that is outside of culture, but people have no way of

knowing it. And so, for all intents and purposes, culture constitutes everything. Dumont is quite different from this in two ways. One, that I think shouldn't be very controversial for social scientists, is that he says that actually, as social scientists, we have a commitment to a certain reality that is probably true even if a certain culture does not recognize it. This reality is one in which human beings are culturally shaped. It is one in which there is no such thing as individuals entering into a social contract. There is no such thing as the sort of raw individual who is then somehow corrupted by culture. Or lifted up by culture. In reality, on this account, society has to exist as a thing prior to the individual. For Dumont, this is a reality. He thinks most cultures in the world understand that, and that understanding is part of what he calls holism. Their strongest value is realizing a certain state of the social whole, a task defined as crucial because in this reality people's lives are understood to depend on it. In fact, Dumont says the Western ideology is the one culture that does not recognize that piece of reality. It does not recognize that people really are socially constituted and instead gets it kind of backwards and imagines that society is constituted by individuals.

So that is the first thing. Dumont believes there is a real bedrock reality that cultures can be wrong about. There's a relational psychologist, I do not remember his name, who referred to individualism as 'the great cultural error'. So, that makes Dumont very distinctive from the run-of-the-mill cultural anthropologists who would imagine that, well, if you live in a society that says that individuals make society, then that is the world you live in. He answers: "No, actually, that is a misrepresentation of the world that people have to live in."

The second way he leaves room for a reality that affects society but is not culturally defined is that he thinks that all different kinds of human arrangements are probably going on in any human society. All different forms of practice can be going on, but only some of them are culturally recognized. Those will be elaborated, those will be valued, those will be the kind of things you can argue for publicly and commit your life to. But he thinks there is a certain baseline kind of set of human interactions that all human beings are capable of and that are probably going on in every society, even if they are not recognized and elaborated. Which is why he could find individuals in Indian society, or he could find spaces of holism in the West.

MR: This brings us to the next question. How do values help people to orientate to the world? Are values the same thing as morality to you?

JR: I think what makes Dumont really distinctive is that he is a great representative of the French tradition—a sort of rationalist tradition—who also has some familiarity with German social scientists. So he's got this idea of value that really isn't part of French anthropology. The problem with value, as it had mostly been used, was that it was understood as a subjective factor. So you have a world out there and then you would have an individual response to it that would give that world out there one value or another. This is what neoclassic economics is based on. Dumont insisted that values are actually part of the cultural structure. We can figure out what the values are by how cultures are arranged; by what ideas get more attention; by what ideas are more thoroughly argued for; by what ideas people apply in more contexts; by what ideas they tell you are important to them, but not simply because you can say those ideas are important subjectively to some people you talk to, but because everybody you talk to is going to tell you about the same values and

you can see it in their public culture and in the things they produce. So just to begin, that is the huge innovation Dumont makes. He says yes, value is really important, but it is part of the culture, or the ideology. It is not a subjective response to the culture.

However, at the same time, we do have an awareness of having our own individual projects, of certain motivations that we at least think of as our own and we act on as our own. And most of those projects are pretty culturally given, too, but when we hook up with them as acting people, we generally are thinking about the cultural values that matter to us. Dumont allows you to capture that part of reproduction also.

Now, to answer about morality: There really hasn't been any anthropology of morality and one of the big reasons there hasn't, is that Durkheim bequeathed to us the idea that all action that reproduces society is moral. If you read Durkheim, morality is the social and the social is reproducing these patterns, so that is it. If everything is equally moral, then to study social life is to study morality. You do not need to pay special attention to morality, because you are studying it all the time.

At the same time as this idea of Durkheim's has blocked the development of an anthropology of morality, he is not wrong either. So what I, at least, have wanted to argue recently is that there is probably something like a morality of reproduction that Durkheim was right about. But there is also a sense people have when cultural values conflict, when they get into situations where the cultural values do not seem to give them perfectly clear guidance on what to do, when they suddenly become very self-conscious about choosing between values and explaining their behaviour to themselves. And that is a morality that is much more self-conscious of its freedom. So we probably need two models of morality to really to capture what social life is like.

MR: You have also introduced Dumont as a theorist of globalization. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

JR: As you remember, I said that Dumont thinks all societies in reality have to have some kind of a social whole supporting them. Thus individualism can be a cultural view of society, a cultural way of understanding social life, but it can never be the whole truth about social life because societies need to precede individuals. Now Dumont recognized that in recent decades individualism has travelled around the world. He didn't call this process globalization, he died before that term was in common usage, but he called it cultural interaction. He said that when individualism travels around the world, it can never erase holist values. It can never completely erase the power of the social whole, so what we're going to see everywhere in the world, he argued, were different struggles between individualism and holism, and what anthropologists really need to do is to study the whole range of these struggles and compare them. There was a term he used, which ends up looking very prophetic of him: He said that we have to study the "hybrids" that result from struggles between individualism and holism.

So it turns out that Dumont really does have a theory of globalization and it is, I think, a little bit different: It isn't about flows, which are there and are worth studying. And it isn't about the reorganisation of global economy. It is about what happens to values in conditions of globalization. I think this is a distinctive approach, and well worth pursuing.

MR: You have quoted Dumont's notion of individualism as a kind of utopian theory sheltered against any contact with actual social life. So individualism actually means being out of step with social reality.

JR: For Dumont, again, for reasons I have just laid out, he does not believe anybody can actually live wholly in individualism. And that is what he means by saying it is utopian: people can want very much to live within individualism. They can try as hard as they can to design societies that are individualist, but—by his reckoning at least—you can never organise a society wholly along individualist lines. So it has to remain essentially utopian. One part of the energy of individualist formations is this utopianism, this fact that you imagine that you could change reality, to bring it in conformity with your individualist ideals. Maybe utopianism isn't a universal social form, maybe it is really at home in certain kinds of cultures. I haven't thought about that.

MR: You have developed further some of Dumont's ideas and talk about the global hierarchy of values in the context of globalization. How does that help us to approach globalization?

JR: Dumont can help us pose the question. If people are globalising, they are doing it because they are trying to realise some kind of value. Once people become globalized, it is because they have a sense that there is a global value that they need to be trying to organise their lives around, trying to reach. In the simplest terms, I have defined value as something people think is important. And the really big values are things that they think are important in themselves, not just as ways to get to other things.

People now find themselves living in a world that they imagine has values spread out through space, that there are some places where people are really realising what they call modern or developed values. Or we might say they are realising individualist values. And then at home, people feel they can only do a half-way job at that, or maybe even only a quarter-way job. And then their project often becomes making their own place into a place where they can realise those values, which at least in New Guinea is usually called development. Or, if they can't imagine realising such values in their own place, they migrate. They move to those places where they think those values are more fully realisable. New Guineans do not do that so much, because even New Guinea cities are not places in which most New Guineans imagine those global core values are being realised. But I do think that part of being globalised, or living toward globalisation, is coming to see values as realised differently in different parts of the world and wanting to somehow change the way values are realised either in your place or in your life by going to another place.

MR: I think it is important to think in terms of people making globalization their own cultural project.

JR: That's right, their own project. And then it is a part of a kind of cultural self-appraisal. People, in conditions of globalisation, really do ask themselves: Where are we? Where do we stand? What's the hierarchy? Where are we within it? And that is how it becomes a part of their project, replacing perhaps an older model when they imagined 'we are the people and we are the centre'. I should mention that in some respects this line of thinking was

crystallized for me by Tom Strong, who began to think about these things while he was a Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology here in Helsinki. He was in part responding to some earlier work of mine and other people trying to develop Sahlins' notion of the role of humiliation in radical cultural change, and he helped me to see this work in a new light and to push it further.

MR: You have also talked about the desire to move one's place within the hierarchy of places. Could you give an example of that?

JR: Well, the example that is the easiest for me to give is the people I work with, the Urapmin. They are pretty remote by New Guinea standards: There are no roads in Urapmin, no electricity. There's no market. There's a goldmine about four, five days away from Urapmin, so the Urapmin know what some of that stuff looks like, they know very well. And they know what the cash economy looks like, a little bit. But they are remote enough that government officers used to come by only once a year. The missionaries never got there. They are all Christian, but that the missionaries didn't do ...but that that is another conversation.

The Urapmin divide the world into what they call 'black' and 'white'. All kinds of objects are divided into black and white: There are black and white foods. Black foods are the things that the Urapmin grow in their gardens; things they hunt for; things that grow on trees and so on. Then there are white foods, which mostly comes in cans and bags. One thing about cans and bags is that they are pretty hard to get in Urapmin. But the Urapmin assume you never have a bad harvest of that stuff. That is how they see it. And you do not have to work so hard for it, as they see it. And those foods—they like to say—give you more strength, they are stronger.

There are black and white ways of doing things too. Getting along and working together so that everybody benefits as individuals, that is a white way of doing things. Fighting over stuff and not getting along, that is a black way of doing things. Then there are black and white places, and that is really important to them. Papua New Guinea is a black place. They are black; they have no doubts that they are black, because if you are born in a black place, you are black. And then there are white places, which are for them pretty much every place else. They've heard about black Africans and that is a pretty interesting category for them, but they can't do very much with it, either. They do not know whether it is a black place or a white place. Obviously this isn't just about skin colour, right?

The Urapmin are really committed to moving themselves to a white place, and they imagine a few different ways of doing it. One would be for development to come to their land, which would mean, basically, that they would have some way of having a cash economy on their land. They do not think there's much chance of this, but they've tried sheep raising and chicken raising. It does not work, they are too far from the market, but they try. Another way for them to move themselves to a whiter place would be for a mining company to build a mine on their land, like they did to the land of their neighbours, and move them to a town. On earth, that would be the best possible outcome. And there's some mineral prospecting in Urapmin, as there is everywhere in this area, so they have pretty developed hopes about this. But then the third way to move themselves to a higher place in the global hierarchy would be to get to Heaven and this is where Christianity

comes in, because Heaven is a place where everybody lives like whites. I mean, it does not look like a town, exactly, because it is even simpler than that, in terms of its perfect whiteness. But the big thing—and this partially explains why my fieldwork was about what it was about—is that the Urapmin really know they can't control development. They know it really does not work for them. They do their very best to help the gold mining along in various ways—I won't get into that—but they know they can't make it their project, either, because they do not have control. The Christian thing they can do on their own. They can try to get to Heaven on their own. So they sort of see that as the most effective way to move themselves closer to the centre—or to the very centre—of what they see as the global hierarchy. And that is where they put most of their time and energy.

MR: You're also editor of *Anthropological Theory* and there are a lot of discussions going on that there's nothing new happening in anthropology, that there is no good theorisation going on. How do you see it, as the editor of your journal: Is there something new going on?

JR: There are a few ways to attack that question. The first thing is: I do not think there's any doubt that anthropological theory is extremely fragmented right now. There are some individual thinkers who are pretty interesting and each of them has four, five or six people, who are kind of interested in them. Like, when you asked me if I had any enemies, I do not know where people today find productive enemies. You kind of have to invent a theorist that you do not like. I have a joke about Britain, which is they never had culture, and now that they do not have society anymore; all they have left are things and subjectivities, so you have Daniel Miller and Tim Ingold. But neither of them strikes me as someone I'm going to get that far engaging with anthropologically. They are quite interesting, but I'm not sure either one of them help you do ethnography as much as they could.

In the United States you have got a really broken field. There's Agamben, who's a philosopher who helps you to understand the current moment. But he seems enormously limited to me, to be a principal theorist. Not that he does not have insights, but compared to somebody, say, like Dumont... For anthropologists, there isn't this kind of rounded version of what it is to study another culture. Marilyn Strathern has a lot of people very interested in her. But it's still a relatively small group compared to the discipline as a whole. The days when everyone in the field felt they had to grapple with a single thinker seem completely gone. We do not have a shared theoretical discourse anymore.

To my mind, the last person everyone felt they had to read was Bourdieu. I could sit with anyone here and we could have a discussion about Bourdieu based on both of us having read at least a little bit of him, if not a lot. But after everyone read Bourdieu in the 1980s, there is an enormous fragmentation and that is a sad part of the story of anthropological theory. But there are also two good parts to that story that I have learned to tell myself, because I edit this journal that is named after a kind of theory that is fragmented. One is that I think one of the reasons we do not have even a few unified theoretical discourses that can argue with each other now is specialization—so in specialized fields we do have interesting theoretical developments. The second thing I tell myself is that for the last twenty years we have been making a radical change in our object of study—a change that really expands it in time. We discovered history; we discovered the need to

place the situations we study temporally and relate them to what came before. And then we discovered all these connections across space between the societies we study. And the process of making these discoveries took an enormous amount of work. I came up in anthropology while that work was being done, and it took up tremendous time, for people to kind of say “Okay, if we’re going to say that societies really are historical, how are we going to study that? How are we going to adapt our methods so we can study that?” And similarly, figuring out how to study the inter-connections took an enormous amount of work.

So I think historical anthropology, globalisation and all kinds of things connected with them, succeeded in fundamentally changing our sense of the object we study. And that was enormously important. But none of this quite constituted a theory, you know? Globalization is not a theory; it is a kind of a description of the world. Then you have to have a theory about it. And I think we are at a moment now where we are pretty confident about our object again. Ethnography is very sophisticated again now. There was a period, fifteen, twenty years ago where people would just talk abstractly for their whole fifteen-minute paper at the American Anthropological Association—mostly about Bourdieu!—imagining they were doing theory. People now feel very comfortable that they can bring ethnography to those talks, that they can present it, that they can organise it in a way other people will find interesting, and in fact they do.

So we’ve gotten back to feeling comfortable with our object, having changed it. We now need a whole set of theories that respond to this new kind of object and I’m not sure if we have them yet. And I think that the next flowering of anthropological theory will be catching up with this world we’ve learned to live in and study, but haven’t yet learned to theorise. So that is, I think, the hopeful part. The other thing is that in the currently fragmented world you can do, theoretically, kind of what you want to, which is pretty exciting. I mean, it is a little scary because you do not get as much help from others as you might want, but it’s exciting as well.

We were talking about marginalization; I used to feel pretty marginal in the American scene, pretty askance from the mainstream, as I said. Now that everyone’s marginal I’m just as central as anybody else!

MR: The title of our talk tonight is: *Anthropology matters*. How does it matter to you?

JR: One thing that anthropologists study a lot these days is human rights, but it is not a theory. There is a story I use sometimes with students to remind them that not all things are theories: Imagine that you met an astronomer and you said to him, “What’s your theory?” And the astronomer says, “Oh, my theory is Mars.” That is not a theory; that is a planet! That is a place to look. A lot of things in anthropology people sometimes treat as theoretical turn out to be places to look.

A couple of years or so ago I was invited to a conference on human rights and anthropology. And that is a subject that I find really difficult, because people who are committed to that are really, really committed to it. And they basically feel that this is one place where anthropological relativism can’t go. The kind of binarism and the use of binarism for critique that I talked about in Dumont, Durkheim, even Roy Wagner? They do not want to do it. They do not want to entertain that. You might know this, but when the UN

Declaration of Human Rights was first drafted, they asked different academic disciplines for comment, and Herskovits led a committee that wrote a comment on it for the American Anthropological Association—this is in the late 1940s, right after WW II. The language is really strikingly contemporary. They said: “Well, we kind of think this is cultural imperialism and you better be pretty careful.” For a lot of anthropologists today and for almost everybody else in the human rights world, that was seen as an enormous mistake, as tremendously damaging us politically, making anthropology reveal itself as politically compromised from the get-go.

That was a very hard context for me to go into, to talk amongst a lot of legal anthropologists and legal theorists who wanted to talk about human rights. I wanted to try to talk about difference, and the ways difference can be integrated. A quotation from Marcel Mauss I used in that talk re-connected me with why I think anthropology matters. I talked about how important relationships and making relationships are in New Guinea, and that I think New Guineans recognize the rights of relationships but not individuals. I think their notion of rights is that relationships have the right to exist and that conditions have to be set up such that relationships can exist. Not so that the individuals who make relationships can exist, not so that the societies in which those relationships may be set can exist—so the relationships themselves can exist. If you were to make the Urapmin talk in human rights language, they would say what we need to respect are the rights of relationships.

And as part of putting this together, of course, I was rereading a lot of Mauss, because *The Gift* is classic on this. This quote does not actually come from *The Gift*, it comes from some occasional writing Mauss did and I picked it up in a biography of him. He said somewhere, “Societies will probably end up being judged not on the things they know very well and find it easy to promote, but on the ideas that they had a chance to borrow and failed to borrow. On the ideas that they refused to take from other peoples who had figured them out and had elaborated them more fully than they were able to.” And I still think, for me, that is how anthropology matters: it gives us a chance make people realize the force of this point. In saying this, I am thinking about how we make anthropology matter to all of our audiences, whoever they may be, which by the way has to include students as much as anyone else. I lecture to three hundred beginning students every Monday, Wednesday and Friday; that is my public intellectual role—an important audience for me.

So to me a key way anthropology can matter is to expose our own societies to ideas that we could borrow, that we could learn from. And it could communicate that probably in the end, if we do not borrow them and do not take them seriously, that is what we’ll be judged on and not on the things that we found most easy and were most good at and most wanted to lead everyone else to do.

MR: In a way, focussing on human rights has been an attempt by anthropologists to make themselves matter outside the academy, but you’re saying it is flawed, because anthropology should matter on its own terms.

JR: When I want to be really provocative about this I say there’s a form of anthropology that wants very much to matter outside the academy that becomes kind of elevated social work. I mean that if anthropology subordinates itself to other people’s projects, to projects

that line up behind one or another kind of universalism or one or another western goal, then for me it is not wholly anthropology anymore. That kind of anthropology can help; it can certainly do good in the world. If you want to introduce human rights into a country or into a situation and you can find an anthropologist who will help you to negotiate the cultural complexity of that task, that is fine for *you*—the human rights worker—and the outcome might well be better than if you did not find an anthropologist to help you. And I'm certainly not going to condemn the anthropologist for doing it, but I don't think that is, in a strict sense, an anthropological project—the kind of project only anthropology can do and which for that reason should always be at least part of the anthropologist's vocation: For me this is first and foremost harnessing the critical potential of the fact of different ways of living—of cultural difference.

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