A CONVERSATION WITH MARILYN STRATHERN 10TH DECEMBER, 2009

• MINNA RUCKENSTEIN AND MATTI ERÄSAARI •

Professor Strathern recently delivered the 25th annual Westermarck Memorial Lecture in Helsinki: the lecture, titled 'Comparing Concerns', was published in issue 4/2009 of *Suomen Antropologi*. In the lecture Professor Strathern highlighted a number of unvoiced assumptions prevalent in the fields of organ, tissue and blood donations, through a comparison of contexts that are often considered incompatible. This is a perspective that has been dominant in much of her work: opening up new angles of approach through comparisons from a broad range of fields including personhood, gender, systems of kinship, law, intellectual and cultural property, and new reproductive technologies, to mention but some of her interests. In addition, she has been an active discussant on questions of administrative reforms in academia, though she does not regard herself as political in the sense that many people who read her work actually do. These were the issues that were foremost in our minds as we sat down for a conversation with Professor Strathern. In between her Westermarck lecture, a seminar held in her honour, and the Finnish Anthropological Society Christmas party, time was a scarce resource; we therefore decided to waste no words on idle chit-chat and dove right in at the deep end.

On anthropology as a discipline

Minna Ruckenstein (MR): Perhaps we start with the importance of retaining disciplines in the contemporary academic world?

Marilyn Strathern (MS): Well, we work in a multi-disciplined environment. Of course, most of the problems people face are going to draw from diverse aspects of their life, and in the same way, major problems that face governments or policymakers, necessarily, are going to have interdisciplinary elements. As I see it, what disciplines have become are arenas where, in the investigations and studies that you make, you can provide the reasons for why you approach things in certain ways. You can provide the intellectual rationale for using certain concepts and this, actually, is not trivial. I think the Internet has shown, in quite interesting ways, both the joys of instant access to knowledge but also the problems of knowledge where you are not certain what the sources are, and you do not know what the credentials are of the people who put information up there. And I think it was always the case that what made a discipline was laying out the grounds on which knowledge was built.

Sociology and anthropology, for example, deal in the world with very similar people, and yet deal with different problems. Their reasons for their styles of investigation—and even their styles of investigation are not that distinct—but their reasons and their rationale and the literature that they go to [in order] to understand what they are doing,

their whole process of cognition if you like, are different. And there is a rider to that that I think is quite important: one of the issues that I think we are probably going to come to later, when we are talking about valuing knowledge as a good and setting up programmes which give a clear value to a piece of information, and the rest of it, is that when you turn something into a good or a value like that, you tend to think that the more you have, the better. You also tend to fall into a way of thinking which means that we ought always to be productive: everything needs to be produced for a use. This becomes elided with quite different forms of production, in manufacturing or agriculture or wherever, well... I shall not use the analogy of financial growth.

MR: So, disciplines give us guidelines.

MS: Disciplines give us guidelines, but they also give us the basis for criticism. One of the problems of the overvaluation of knowledge and the notion that one should be producing (that, as academics, we should always be productive), is that what is downplayed—what is in fact crucial to the academic enterprise or certainly crucial to research—is being able to realize that a lot of what one does is waste and to be discarded. But, secondly, a lot of what one does is contentious. The ability to criticize, take a view back from and realize that what one is doing is contested, and appreciate the different ways of approaching any particular subject matter, are what disciplines help fabricate. So, disciplines do not just provide guidelines. They provide the basis upon which one has critical scrutiny on what it happening. And that critical scrutiny takes place within the discipline, not only between disciplines. And that is often regarded, of course, as a weakness. You know: the anthropologists cannot agree on a notion of culture! Of course they cannot.

MR: The metaphor of waste is fascinating. In an academic environment that seeks production of usable knowledge, criticism inevitably becomes a waste.

MS: That is right. I think that the two tools provided by disciplines are very important. Anybody who has worked in an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary context knows the problems of evaluating and judging the outcome of what is done.

MR: What are then the most productive practices? We have already touched on criticism. What are the other practices that produce good anthropology?

MS: What I was talking about yesterday [i.e. the Westermarck Lecture], which still goes under the comparative method, is obviously very important. Because that has critique embedded within it, in the sense that one is always looking at one set of data through another set of data. The kinds of issues, of course, and the kinds of arenas of subject matter on which comparative analysis is done, is in turn very often informed by what I would call—I do not want to call it fieldwork or ethnography because we already understand what those are—what I would call 'focused attention on detail'. The thing about focused attention on detail is that you discover that within the detail, of course, are large, large issues. But starting with detail, I think, is one of the anthropologists' strengths.

Matti Eräsaari (ME): You are among the few anthropologists who use those details for comparison. In a sense comparative anthropology seems to have gone out of fashion. What do you think has happened?

MS: You are absolutely right. I do not know if you are familiar with André Gingrich and Richard Fox's book *Anthropology, by Comparison*, which is an attempt to revive interest in comparative anthropology. I think, first of all, that detailed studies have tended to become all-absorbent in a very odd way. Ethnography is, in a sense, better than ever. I mean, some of the stuff that is produced these days is absolutely superb.

But what has displaced, I think, the old efforts of comparison and the old attempts to produce a natural history of the subject, has been the attention on the ethnographer. And that, of course, came in with the reflexive turn. The internal dynamic is now shifted. It still has a dynamic, but the internal dynamic is between producing the ethnography and the ethnographer. There is a kind of implicit comparison there, insofar as the ethnographer contributes from his or her own position. But it is not the kinds of comparisons that used to be set up.

In fact, I might ask you back, whether it is true here [in Finland] as it is in England: The social relation does not hold the central place that it used to. [Once it was the case that] you would describe, obviously, relations between persons but also how people operate as members of institutions or particular groups or whatever, and you would set up an analytical framework that was to do with categories and classifications and the differences made through interactions and so forth. And, bit by bit, groups, categories, classifications have all been displaced by other interests. With that have gone, I think, some of the tools that were once used for understanding or appreciating the effect of relationships between persons. Is that true here?

MR: No, I do not think so. I think these things are quite important for us. What do you think, Matti?

ME: I am not sure. I think in terms of thinking through categories or building arguments on classifications… Well, you have two camps. I guess there are those people who would feel this is an outmoded way of thinking.

MR: The people who do the categorizations do not necessarily do social relations, and the other way around.

ME: This is also connected to places of research and particularly the question of anthropology at home. It seems that sometimes people who set out to do anthropology at home would like to do away with the comparative angle.

MS: I think this is where we come back to the discipline, if one wanted to compare sociology and anthropology. Anthropology's reference points are different. I think that leads to a question on teaching, which is the extent to which one continues to teach a broad spectrum of ethnography and theory. If one were to produce a department that was

all anthropology at home, in terms of its reading lists, then I would think something had happened to the discipline.

On audit culture

MR: You just returned from Brazil.

MS: It was actually my second visit to Brazil; I had been there some time ago, in 1998. People in Rio wanted me to give a paper, and to give something really exotic I thought, 'Oh, I will do a description about UK higher education'. Analyzing what was happening with these systems of evaluation and accounting. And they all said, yes, this is happening here: it was not exotic [at all]. It is interesting that when the book *Audit Cultures* was put together it was not an issue in many places, but I think it has become an issue. It would actually be interesting to understand how these things travel. One suspects it is fairly simple. One suspects it is different ministries of education looking at other ministries of education. But one, as an ordinary citizen, does not know the channels.

MR: Also, when the discourse travels, what do words actually come to mean? Even if it is the same language, even if they are the same practices, they are not the same. That is the fascinating part of audit cultures.

MS: That is very true. And they have different effects, of course, depending on where they take root. What are the keywords here [in Finland]? Transparency? Accountability? Value for money?

MR: The words are exactly the same. I might add 'having an impact'.

MS: The Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, ESRC, is the funding body for anthropology among other things—plus the other research councils, I should say, they are all together in this—and on the application form for research grants, you have to put what you think are the likely impacts and how you are going to investigate and demonstrate that there have been these impacts. And there is even the suggestion, although this is not official, that there will be a register set up so that for the five years following your grant, you register the impacts that your research has had. This is such... one does not know really where to begin. It is infantile. It has the infantilism of questionnaires that follow lecture courses. You know? Students are required to score the lecture course, I do not know if you have it here: was the lecture course useful, how would you rate it in terms of clarity etc. And while it is quite useful to get an off-the-cuff reaction of how the student is feeling then, they tell nothing about long term effects on learning where time—real, organic time—is actually incredibly important. This instant evaluation is not.

MR: What I see in Finland is that basic research has become a source of mistrust. That it is knowledge that cannot be used, taken advantage of, and therefore we need to rely on applied research and that's where the great innovations will emerge.

MS: That is quite interesting. So, what then becomes the purpose of universities?

MR: That is what I am asking.

ME: And anthropology is just too slow in producing knowledge, which is connected to the history of the discipline. Plus we do not give out snappy end results, things that can be listed on one sheet of paper.

MR: Innovation research convincingly demonstrates that innovation work requires a certain amount of openness: outcomes cannot be measured beforehand. So in that sense, if you can prove that auditing kills innovation, you have a pretty powerful argument against knowledge management.

MS: That is right. One of the strategies, I suppose, would be to go into commercial companies and see what they are doing in their research and design departments and—I suspect—things are quite different. This paper world is a fantasy.

MR: It is a fantasy. You have said that audit can be interpreted as an actant, following Bruno Latour. What do you mean by that?

MS: I think that was the point at which I was trying to say that everything that can be bracketed under 'audit' is now an active participant in the way our education has to manage its affairs. I meant it in that sense, but also in a sense that related directly to the book. (Herzfeld had argued that any enlightened analysis of institutions must not hide behind them but bring social agency into the picture: I was quipping, here is a social agent but it is a non-human one!)

On taking a stand

ME: I have been impressed by the way you have been writing about audit culture, because you are analytical and political at the same time. I guess that has always been a particularly difficult combination in anthropology, where everyone learns the basics of relativism before they learn to write.

MS: You have touched two things that I could perhaps talk about. I am a child of the 1930s: that is my parents' formative period. So I am the child of that formation. And I never lived up to their expectations of how one should be a good citizen, which for the 1930s was through politics. Of course, with what was going on in Europe at the time, being politically active was absolutely the way to demonstrate that you were a full person. That simply was not my style. I would defend myself, to myself, by saying, 'Well, actually, the world shifts for economic reasons; politics is no longer the source of understanding it had once seemed to be.' The issues that so concerned the different European regimes in the 1930s had quite been differently configured.

But I developed a sort of home-grown set of strategies for political commentary through anthropology, and through the kinds of things you can do if you are trapped in a system and do not have a voice, but none the less want to make a comment: irony. Or sometimes sarcasm, but usually irony, in order to try to reflect back or just to draw attention to what is going on. I suppose that became my style. The problem is it does not translate very well. It can be easily misunderstood. I am actually very often writing in someone else's voice, but nobody can tell that [I am told] because I very often fail to distinguish clearly enough what is my own voice and what it is I am quoting. Because I do not have much of a voice (and I do not like having opinions). But none the less, as inadequate and ill-used as this strategy is, it did help me when I was head of department and had to persuade the department to comply with these audit requests, especially the [UK] Research Assessment Exercise. It did enable me to keep in parallel, as it were, a sort of running critical commentary that did not undermine the compliance. But it mirrored it [the RAE, and the staff's feelings about it] back to the staff in the first place, because the staff could see through the whole thing, the problems with it.

MR: People operate in different worlds in these environments. I sometimes wonder how it affects their thinking.

MS: I think that if the audit culture came in entirely from the outside, then you would be creating a split in one's action or consciousness. But of course, we are part of it. Our procedures of examining students and so forth—we have our own practices, and we are part of the wider education system. I was chair of the RAE assessment exercise [of the Anthropology panel] for one year and a member [of the panel] for another year. I have contributed to this because I cannot see any other system. So, the irony, the raised eyebrow, is [also] against oneself. It is not simply subversive of what is out there. It is a commentary on compliance, what one is doing by also being part of this system. In that sense, far from undermining, it is actually quite therapeutic to be able to have a place where you can ask questions and comment on what it is you are doing, even though you have problems with acting thus. I see it as a release or therapy or a little ground from which one can be critical. It is not a discipline, it is a ground from which one can be critical of oneself, while knowing there is necessarily no other way to act. That is why this kind of politics is such a betrayal of the kind of politics my parents grew up with, where taking action is the only way in which you can demonstrate what you think.