

INTERVIEW

WITH PHILIPPE DESCOLA

Professor Philippe Descola visited Finland in October 2015 to deliver the Edward Westermarck Memorial Lecture during the biennial conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society, which had the theme, ‘Landscapes, sociality, and materiality’. During a career spanning four decades, Professor Descola, who currently holds the Chair in the Anthropology of Nature at the Collège de France, has built on his ethnographic research with the Achuar of the Upper Amazon to make many groundbreaking contributions in the research fields of ecological anthropology, the ethnography of lowland South America, and the comparative study of human-nonhuman relations. Perhaps his most widely known contribution has been the development of a framework that displaces the assumed universality of the Western nature/culture dichotomy by providing models of four possible ontological modes of structural relations through which humans and nonhumans form viable collectives. His current research project takes the form of a book showing how the differences between the four ontological modes are made evident in the investigation of processes of iconic figuration.

In connection with the conference and his Westermarck lecture entitled ‘Landscape as Transfiguration’, Professor Descola granted the following interview, discussing some of the main interests and themes that have informed his research career.

Aleksis Toro (AT): Your early studies were in philosophy but you decided to pursue anthropology and did fieldwork for three years

in the mid-1970s with the Achuar of the Upper Amazon, investigating how they related to nature in their surroundings. What sparked your interest in anthropology and compelled you to embark on that project?

Philippe Descola (PD): Well there’s a long tradition in France of social scientists converting from philosophy to the social sciences. It started early on with Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, Lévi-Strauss, and a long list of other names, and more recently Bourdieu, Godelier and other people went through this metamorphosis. And one has to take into account that this is a certain variety of philosophy, not French philosophy in itself but a way of teaching philosophy in France, which is based on the critical history of discursive formations. It is a very good training to allow you to understand how concepts are in interplay with other concepts in specific texts, how texts from one philosopher respond to texts from another philosopher, etc. But I felt dissatisfied by the fact that the questions that were being asked were the questions that had been asked ever since 2500 years ago—from the Greeks onwards—about being, about truth, about the legitimacy of certain kinds of scientific propositions, about morality etc., without taking into account other ways of asking these questions that had been observed by anthropologists and by historians. So there was a self-centered dimension to philosophy which I found problematic, and this is why rather than being interested in experiments of thought, again like many others in France, I preferred to study or to be acquainted with real life experiments—how people live and the way

they organize their lives: questions that were not conceivable in the philosophical panorama in general.

I had been interested in anthropology in general very early on. I'd read *Tristes Tropiques* when I was 16 or 17 and I was fascinated, not so much by the Indians in the book because it's an intellectual biography, but by the man, Lévi-Strauss, someone who was at the same time obviously a very learned and sensible person, who wrote very well, with a very incisive mind, who could write as well on Debussy and Rousseau and on the Bororo Indians in Brazil. So this form of humanism, of very broad culture, fascinated me... and I said, 'If this person is an anthropologist, then anthropology must also be a fascinating science.' This is how I decided to read a little bit more in anthropology. I went through the classical French system of competitive examination and to the *École normale supérieure*, where all my co-disciples were either in literature or philosophy, even math or physics, because it's an integrative school, and they were discussing the more philosophical texts of Lévi-Strauss and anthropology like *The Savage Mind* and *Tristes Tropiques*. I was also interested in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and things like that which were more technical, so progressively I moved towards anthropology. And then there was a former student of the *École normale supérieure*, Maurice Godelier, who was young at the time and just back from his fieldwork with the Baruya in New Guinea. He had just published a book which was called *Rationality and Irrationality in Economics*, which was broadly speaking a criticism of political economy and a new reading of Marx's *Capital*, which was a very common thing at the time, as we were immersed in the texts of Marx and Engels, especially Marx. And so at the end of his book there is an analysis of pre-capitalist forms of production and exchange which I

found fascinating. Here was a rigorous way to enter the question of the diversity of forms of life in the world. So that's when I decided to become an anthropologist.

I went to southern Mexico for my first fieldwork. I was, as were many of the students in philosophy in my generation, a militant, I was a Trotskyite, so I thought that by going into the cauldron of neo-colonialism to try to understand the local situation, I would be faithful to my political leanings. So I went to southern Chiapas, to a place in the forest where Tzeltal colonists, that is, Maya Indians from the highlands, had moved to settle the forest because they had been pushed away from their lands by landowners. And I was already interested in the way that people adapt to new environmental circumstances. The problem was they did not adapt very well, in the sense that they felt rather unhappy. It was a very different form of environment; although it was only a six or seven days walk from the highlands, it was really deep forest. So I spent a few months there and then I felt dispirited because they were themselves quite unhappy, and I said, 'I can't spend two years with people who are not really happy in the forest.' I think it's important that when you do fieldwork you should at least feel well. Otherwise, if fieldwork is a sort of duty, I don't think it is good fieldwork. You can't do good fieldwork if every morning you say 'I must get up and do my work.' You must enter into the flow of things in order to do good fieldwork. So in that case it didn't go well, and in fact these people became the forerunners of the Zapatista movement, so there were good reasons not to be happy, the landowners were also moving into the forest, etc.

I had thought about going to Amazonia but I thought it was very petty bourgeois, you know, romantic and so on, but I decided to hell with my scruples, so I decided to go to

Amazonia for a variety of reasons. One of them was that we had no real understanding of what Amazonia was and what Amazonian people were. Of course there was Lévi-Strauss and a few good ethnographers—there were Stephen and Christine Hugh-Jones who had just come back from the field, we're talking about the beginning of the 1970s. I went to Mexico in 1973 and I went to the Amazon in 1974, to Ecuador. At the time there were only a very few things: some of the things that Lévi-Strauss had written on mythology, there were people like Maybury-Lewis who had written on the Xavante—a very classical monograph of the British sociological school—and there was Goldman on the Cubeo... There were a few books but there was no tradition in anthropology on the lowlands. One of the things which struck me when reading this scattered ethnographic literature—which in fact began, by contrast with other parts of the world, very early on in the 16th century, before ethnography or anthropology became real sciences—was a sort of leitmotif in this ethnography or in these first descriptions, which continues today, which is that these people are mysterious and enigmatic, in the sense that they don't show any kind of institution that could be likened to the institutions we are used to. The French chroniclers who visited and some who settled on the coast of Brazil in the 16th century wrote that these people were *sans foi, sans roi, sans loi*—'without faith, king, or law'—so they did not exhibit any of the normal institutions. There was no territory to speak of—at least there were no villages, in many cases people were living in scattered habitats—there were no chiefs, there were no cults, few rituals, and the rituals were all linked to war. Europeans were very puzzled by this, and what they all emphasized was that these people were 'naturals', they were in fact in a way glued to nature—either positively, in Montaigne's sense as naked philosophers, or as

groups intent on killing each other, incapable of controlling their natural instincts. So there was a leitmotif there. I was reading these chronicles and then the proto-ethnography and the later ethnography, and I was struck by this and thought there must be something in their relation to nature which is very specific for this leitmotif to go on for centuries. And at the time the main type of publication in anthropology on Amazonia in the United States belonged to the so-called cultural ecology school, which was extremely reductionist and also interpreted all social and cultural features as products of adaptation to nature, so there was a continuity in that sense. So I left for fieldwork with the idea of precisely studying in depth how these people related to what I still called at the time 'nature'. So that's how I went to Ecuador with my wife Anne-Christine Taylor.

AT: You've said that your central anthropological interests derive from the astonishment you felt when you encountered some Achuar ways of doing things. Why is astonishment important for ethnography, and how do the encounters and stories of your time with the Achuar continue to inform your work?

PD: I think astonishment is absolutely crucial. Ever since Plato it's considered to be an important quality for philosophers never to take anything for granted and to be astonished by things, and I think it is also true for anthropologists. This is why going to places which are, and to live among people who are, very different from the ones you've been brought up with, is not a question of primitivism or essentialism or whatever name you want to give to that. It's a question of using the distance as a lever to pry open the concepts that would otherwise appear matter of fact or self-evident. The epistemological

distance is always created of course, but if there is effectively a cultural distance, it helps destabilize one's own assumptions. And this is why Amazonia was very interesting, because it was perhaps the farthest one could go in terms of differences. There was a sort of logical scandal in these people: where was society there? Especially among the Achuar: again, living in a very scattered habitat, feuding between themselves, having no chief... I had heard before a very interesting description by a Dominican missionary who had been living near the Achuar at the end of the 19th century, who said they had no religion except birdsongs and dreams. And that was very clever to understand because dreams are one of the means of communication with nonhumans, the spiritual dimension of nonhumans, and birdsongs are songs that the Achuar and the Jivaro in general sing constantly in order to connect themselves with them. So he had a clear idea of what their religion was, but this lucidity was not very common at the time. So this is why the Achuar were fascinating.

AT: Is there a particular encounter or story that was very memorable?

PD: I mentioned a specific episode in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, at the beginning of the book. In this story we are in a house and the lady of the house goes to dump the garbage by the river and she's bitten by a snake. It's a very dangerous snake so she's terrified, and everyone in the house begins wailing, 'She's going to die, she's going to die!' I had serum so I gave her an injection but the husband was completely devastated. I tried to speak with him to lift up his spirits, but he said, 'It's my fault, it's my fault because it was the revenge of the Master of the Animals. Yesterday I went to the forest; I had a new shotgun...' He used to hunt before with his blowgun only and he had acquired a shotgun.

There was a troop of woolly monkeys and he killed many more than he needed to kill. It's a very classical story among hunters everywhere in the world: his hubris made him responsible for the revenge that took the form of a snake bite on his wife. And talking to him I realized how important it was.

You know when you do fieldwork it takes a long time to learn the language—it took us about a year, and so progressively you understand bits and pieces. There was only one young man who knew a little Spanish. The first place where we landed people accepted us quite willingly, I suspect because we were a distraction. We were like pets. They have pet animals everywhere in their houses so we added to their collection of pets. They were observing us, my wife and I, and it was a day to day distraction, so I suspect this was one of the reasons they received us, and after a while we just became part of the daily life. And so learning the language progressively is like watching a movie in a language you don't understand and then you have subtitles that begin to appear, but they are disconnected so you get bits and pieces. When you really start understanding things, this is precisely when you realize these dimensions. So during the first few months I did a very thorough study of the way they were using plants and animals, which could be defined as economic anthropology or human ecology. I collected plants and specimens of soil, etc. I wasn't idle in that sense. And progressively I came out of this gathering of technical and quantifiable material to understanding what people were saying about the things I had been measuring. And obviously there was a huge void between what I was considering at the time, which was the way these people were adapting to their environment, and the way they thought about it, which was in fact as a series of interactions with nonhumans treated as social partners. So that's when I came to realize

that it was absurd to think in terms of a society adapting to a natural environment. ‘Nature’ and ‘society’ were useless concepts for that.

AT: In your first monograph entitled *In the Society of Nature* you sought to bridge the gap between ecological and symbolic approaches in anthropology and to demonstrate how the material and cultural processes that shape Achuar interactions with nonhumans are deeply interwoven. Could you say more about how your approach was informed by the work of Marx and your mentor Lévi-Strauss?

PD: There were three important threads that many anthropologists at the time were trying to weave together. One was Marxism, which was very important for us, the other was structuralism and the third was phenomenology. As students in philosophy we had read a lot of Husserl, and of course Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. And so the question was: how do you combine or weave together these obviously incompatible traditions? And so Godelier, for instance, was an interesting case of trying to produce a structural Marxism. Everything I did, I did because I felt dissatisfied, on the one the hand, with a materialist perspective where there would be a material basis and then a series of layers, like a layer cake—the political system and the ideological system, etc. Then you spend your life trying to understand how these different layers communicate and of course you can’t because you’ve started by dividing, disconnecting them. The other dimension, which was not necessarily that of Lévi-Strauss but of some of his students, was treating nature as a purely intellectual problem, the study of folk classifications, for instance, which Lévi-Strauss does very well in *The Savage Mind*. So nature is a sort of catalogue of properties which the mind uses in order to construct interesting and complex combinations

in myth and classification, etc. But there was more of course than this, in the sense that the Achuar were not concerned only with nature as an intellectual problem, they were concerned with nature, with nonhumans, on a day to day basis. So they were social partners: nature was not only good to think, it was good to interact with. That was the thing that became absolutely obvious for me, that it was good to interact with. So how do you interact with nonhumans? You can’t interact with nature, it’s a hypostasis; it’s like interacting with the state. You can’t interact with the state; you interact with a representative of the state or a representative of nature. So it’s best to eliminate nature altogether and to see how people interact with nonhumans.

And in fact I did that after my doctoral dissertation, which was published in English under the title *In the Society of Nature*. I started teaching at the École des hautes études—I was fortunate enough to get a position soon after I finished my doctoral thesis—and I started a seminar. I was ravenous to understand, with ethnography from neighboring societies—that is from Amazonia and then progressively with ethnography from other parts of the world—...how people interacted with nonhumans elsewhere. So I discovered that in Amazonia most of the features I’d described among the Achuar were present. There was a very common ground there. The game animals were all considered as affines, and affinity is a good relationship to qualify this. This is when I began to read Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who took affinity from the point of view of the relationship with humans, while I was interested in affinity as the relationship with nonhumans, and we discovered that there was a continuity. We arrived at affinity from different perspectives and interests: he came to affinity by studying cannibalism in general and Tupian attitudes towards affinity and in-laws, etc., while I came

to it by studying the relationship with game animals, and we discovered that it was the same realm of social relations, in general.

So during this process the seminar was very good because it was a research seminar, and I was systematically discussing these materials with the students, first from Amazonia and then from northern North America. I progressed northward and then westward to Siberia and I discovered that also in Siberia, the main relationship with the game animals was a relationship of affinity—although it wasn't presented exactly like that, rather they are potential spouses, etc.—and that is one of the ideas of animism. There is something there which is not linked to hunting and gathering because they are not hunter gatherers. In Amazonia the main cultigens have been domesticated at least 8,000 years ago, so it's rather a specific outlook towards nonhumans that you find in different places in the world. And this is when I decided to revise this old concept of animism, which had fallen into disrepute, to define the fact of treating nonhumans through using the same categories that were used to treat humans. Because, of course, what I'd found with the Achuar as well was not only that the game animals were considered and treated as affines, but very often, especially among the Achuar, cultivated plants were treated as consanguines. So the two main categories with which, in Dravidian kinship systems, people are organized—which are consanguines and affines—were used also to deal with nonhumans.

It was my first theory of animism, refined afterwards with a lot of discussions over the years with colleagues I like to call sparring partners—Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Tim Ingold, Bruno Latour—who are both friends and sparring partners in the sense that we can discuss freely. We agree to disagree; we have a

good enough basis of agreement in order to be able to disagree. This is when I realized that my definition of animism was a bit too Durkheimian because I had contrasted it with totemism in the Lévi-Straussian sense, that is, totemism as the use of natural categories to conceptualize social categories, transposing differences between species to differences between human groups. I'd used this definition of totemism to contrast with animism, in the sense that animism was almost the reverse, using social categories in order to deal with nonhumans. Then I realized that that was a bit Durkheimian, and we had a lot of discussions with Viveiros de Castro in this respect and with Tim Ingold, who said that the Lévi-Straussian definition of totemism was much too classificatory and intellectual. So I started also reading material on Australia, and I became aware that it was much too classificatory. This is how, after a while and some years, I came to the combinatorial matrix that I put forth in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, where in fact the relationship between what I call animism, totemism, naturalism—which is 'our' way of doing things since the 17th century, if you wish to give a specific date – and what I call analogism were all transformations of each other, as a transformation of an initial contrast between, on the one hand, interiority and physicality and, on the other, between difference and resemblance. This provided a sort of initial matrix to differentiate ways of detecting continuities and discontinuities among humans and nonhumans.

AT: In *Beyond Nature and Culture* you present this combinatorial matrix of models for possible relationships with nonhumans by considering a vast amount of ethnography from around the world. How did you intend the book to be taken up by anthropologists, for

instance in political ecology, and how would you sum up its central message for a wider audience?

PD: When you write a book like that, although I had these sparring partners, one of them being of course my wife Anne-Christine Taylor, you pursue a solitary path. I had no idea at all what would be the reception of the book, so I was very surprised when I saw that it triggered a lot of interest in many quarters. It's been translated only recently into English but in French it was published more than ten years ago, which is a long enough period to see the results. And it has had an important effect among philosophers, architects, artists, geographers... a number of people. Not necessarily for what I intended to do, for a variety of reasons, with each reader taking from it something which he found interesting or relevant to the discussion in his own discipline. So I'm entirely convinced of the idea that once you write a book it escapes you entirely, as it is being read and commented on, interpreted by other people. I think it was Valéry who said that it may even be that the interpretation that the reader gives may be more interesting than the one you give of your own writing. So you do not own a copyright on your ideas. They are just scattered in the wide world and it's absurd to maintain any orthodoxy. People use it and I'm observing with interest what people are doing with it.

I did this book because I was interested in providing tools which would allow people to go beyond the classical distinctions on which the social sciences had been based ever since the Enlightenment. What I did has at times been defined as being part of the so-called ontological turn. And if I am part of this it is because I feel it's necessary to go to an analytical level which is beyond the classical concepts—like 'society', 'history', 'nature', 'transcendence',

etc.—that we had been using as matter of fact ever since the 19th century. We must go beyond them precisely at the level where people detect continuities and discontinuities in the world, so it's a very elementary level. And the kind of systematization that people will do, according to the social setting where they have been brought up, as to continuities and discontinuities, seems to me to fall within one of these four formulas or models. So I'm providing models with which to try to understand the rules governing compatibilities and incompatibilities between features. It's not intended as a descriptive tool; it's intended as an analytical device to understand the conditions of bringing together, in what I call collectives, certain features and excluding other features. It's heuristic in that sense. And so when I speak of collectives—borrowing the word from Bruno Latour, although with a different sense than the one he gave to it—it's because I'm interested in the form of associations that exist all over the world with humans and nonhumans. 'We' naturalists are one of the aggregates. In a sense I disagree with Latour on that. 'We' decided that there were beings which were natural and beings which were humans. This was a very important dividing line with a lot of consequences, and this dividing line resulted in the fact that we deal with societies as societies of humans. You can speak in ethology at times of 'social species', for instance, but the great obsession of ethology is to avoid projecting sociological concepts onto the nonhuman animal species being studied.

So we have excluded nonhumans from our collectives. Others have brought them into their collectives, but in very different fashions. Animists, for instance, see—as I understand it—all forms of life, or all morphologically distinguished beings who are active, in a way, as constituting a tribe, or a tribe-species, as I call them, who are in interaction with each

other. So there are as many collectives as there are morphologically distinct forms of being. I always quote this description by Bogoraz of the Chukchi, when he said that for the Chukchi the shadows on the wall live in their own villages, where they subsist by hunting. What does this mean? Of course they're not idiots; they understand that the shadows are formed by the interposition of bodies with a source of light, but this is a specific form of being, which is a shadow, and as any other form of being, it has its autonomy, it has its social rules, it has its culture, etc. So when you're talking of collectives you're not presupposing that society, as we understand it, is the basis, the central concept of analysis, that we are giving ourselves—it's just a form of association among others. And what we have to study and understand is how people constitute these associations, and this is repeatable for every other concept. The subject, for instance: a subject is not necessarily derived from the individual human subject as it is conceived in the West. And nor is epistemology, which is reflection on what is knowable, something that can be understood as it is in the West under the conditions of the truth of statements. So every philosophical or metaphysical problem that has been posed in the West is being posed in a different manner elsewhere, and you have to go beyond the traditional concepts to understand them. This is why it's ontological. You cannot say it's sociological because being sociological would mean that society would explain everything, which is not the case. Society is the product, the thing to be explained. It's not the explanatory factor.

I'm not the only one engaged in this project, but it implies a complete reformulation of all the concepts we're using, and in fact of the intellectual framework with which we understand human and nonhuman diversity

in the world, and this reframing has many consequences, some of them being political. The state of the world, including global warming and mass extinction and pollution, is a result, among other things, of this idea that there is, on the one hand, a natural environment and, on the other, a society that views and understands and projects its conceptualization of this environment. This idea is partly responsible for the current situation. It was responsible for very good things also—the development of sciences, of physics, of chemistry etc. I'm not a moralist in that sense. I've been discussing this with Tim Ingold, for instance, because I think he has a more moral position; for him Western epistemology, to use a vague word, is responsible for a completely immoral and false view of the world—if you wish, a false apprehension of the world. Whereas I think it's a partial apprehension of the world. Any ontology leads to a specific systematization of certain properties of the world, so any ontology gives a blueprint for composing certain kinds of worlds. But there are no worlds that are intrinsically better than others. They are all partial realizations of potentialities, qualities, processes, or relations that, for some of them, obviously exist independently from us; and all these partial realizations are legitimate. We can, and we should, fight the consequences of Western hubris and of what naturalism has provoked but, as such, it's not more true or false than an animist or analogist point of view. So in that respect, if I were to give a definition of anthropology, it would be the study of the art of composing worlds. And the political relevance of it is that we can gain through this study an understanding of better ways to compose a common world where nonhumans as well as other modes of composition could all legitimately be represented.

AT: Your current research on landscape extends your work on the four ontological modes. How does the concept of iconic figuration relate to these four ontological modes? What is its critical value for the anthropology of landscape and in what direction do you imagine this will take you in the future?

PD: I think one has to distinguish what I'm doing on landscapes and what I'm doing on images. When I propounded the analytic framework of the four modes of identification in *Beyond Nature and Culture* I was using discursive materials. Even if they mostly belonged to so-called oral literature, they were propositional; and I said, 'If there is any relevance in what I'm proposing it might be a good idea to see how it works with images, to see whether the continuities and the discontinuities which I surmise that people perceive in the objects of their environment are rendered visible in icons.' So initially I became interested—apart from a personal interest I had for many years in the visual arts and their history as a manner of verifying or ascertaining how these modes of identification would be expressed in images, and then progressively I went much beyond that. I'm working on that still. I'm writing a book—which is taking much more time than I thought—in which the central argument is that images are iconic agents. They are both signs that stand for something and agents that act upon humans (and other beings). There has been a curious drift of late between people who treat images mainly as having agency—Alfred Gell gave prominence to the idea but it started long before—and people who treat images as iconic signs which render visible a referent. Obviously they are both, and so you have to study how they can be both at the same time. They have agency

because they are active in certain circumstances, notably ritual circumstances, and they also trigger mechanisms of recognition which are necessary for their agency to be expressed in the right way on the right kind of persons. So what I'm doing now is studying both how images are good iconic clues of certain ontologies—in the sense that they reveal processes and connections between existents that are indicative of a certain way of composing a world in a specific ontology—and, at the same time, how they are agents that can play an active part in the life of humans in certain circumstances because in each of these ontologies they are activated by certain formal devices, which are also specific to the ontologies. So it's a madly ambitious project because the amount of visual material which it requires is absolutely huge.

Landscape is another thing. It's going to be obvious in the lecture I will give later on today that I've been dissatisfied with the way that landscape has been treated in anthropology or in the social sciences in general. As a very loose term, nevertheless based on a quite definite genealogy in the West, landscape has been used—and in fact listening to some of the papers at the conference confirmed this impression—very much like *mana* was used in anthropology some decades ago. That is, it's a European concept with different local origins, whether you consider landscape, *landschaft*, *landschap*, *paesaggio*, *paisaje*, *paysage*, etc. And it is being used much like *mana* was; that is, as a blanket concept, never precisely defined, you can use to describe almost any form of human relation to space, especially those to which you have no direct access. And I don't think it's a good way to do anthropology, to use a concept just to subsume under it almost anything, from the subjective relation to sites to anthropogenic environments. So this is the basis of my interest

in landscape, a militant one; it is also based on a personal taste for landscape painting, gardens and walking ‘in nature’.

AT: What do you consider the most significant ways fieldwork has changed since the 1970s when you began to do ethnography? In what ways has it remained unchanged, and how would you advise students starting their research careers today?

PD: There’s an anecdote I told once in a lecture which was told to me by Meyer Fortes in Cambridge years ago. It was what Malinowski told him before he went to do fieldwork with the Tallensi. Malinowski said, as recounted by Fortes, ‘Meyer, you’re going to write me a letter after a few weeks saying that it’s horrible: the food is horrible, the climate is horrible, the people are not nice at all. Then you’ll write me a series of letters saying things are getting better, you’re getting to work, getting good material and then at the end of the year you’re going to write me a letter saying, “I think it’s alright now, I have all the material, I have a few more things to ascertain and then I’ll come back.” And then you’ll write me another letter, one month after that, saying, “I got it all wrong, I have to stay much longer.” And this is the standard experience of fieldwork, for everyone anywhere, and if it’s not the case, if you feel you can wrap it up in six months, then I don’t think it’s good fieldwork. Fieldwork is a very bizarre experience which is often compared to psychoanalysis; there is a series of steps wherever the fieldwork is being done that one has to follow in order to get a grasp of what is going on, and this doesn’t change: this is the miracle of ethnography.

So what are the changes with respect to that? The main changes are that more and more people tend to study social settings that are closer to their own upbringings. You don’t

do anthropology to resolve your own identity problems, so trying to study a place where you were born and where you were raised might be good to your soul or your self-esteem, but you have to have outstanding self-reflexive and critical capacities to do that well. So I don’t think it’s a very good tendency. I don’t advocate going to ‘primitive tribes’ but I think the cultural and social, even linguistic distance is important in the sense that it provides the initial movement towards being aware of the differences. Another dimension which I think is interesting but not very easy to develop is multi-sited ethnography, because you have to stay in each of the sites long enough to undergo the kind of progressive understanding which Meyer Fortes was mentioning, and which I think most anthropologists will have the experience of. And finally—pleading for my parish in a way—I think that if you are interested in the relationship between humans and nonhumans, what is called multispecies ethnography now, it requires a good capacity to study nonhumans. So if you are interested in the study of the relationship between humans and specific plant communities, it requires botany and the physiology of plants, how plants communicate, etc.; if you are interested in the study of the relationship between humans and specific animal communities, it requires ethology, animal cognition and communication, physiology of reproduction, etc. There are people who are doing that more and more. They are not so numerous because in fact it requires acquiring a double training. I have a young colleague who has been doing that for wolves and herders. He is both an ethologist studying wolves and an ethnologist studying herders, so he can understand how the communities have evolved together in specific circumstances, and how one community of wolves is different from another community of wolves that he

studies comparatively elsewhere. He started his work with herders in Kyrgyzstan. He did his PhD, then he's been studying relationships with wolves and large predators in Norway and Macedonia. I think this is compulsory if you don't want to stay in the realm of fancy. When you talk about human relationships with animals you have to study the latter in

depth at the same time as humans. But it's always a relationship, otherwise you become an ethologist. If you really are interested in doing multispecies ethnography you have to study how humans and nonhumans influence each other, and I think it's a very interesting direction of research for avoiding the anthropocentric prejudice of the social sciences.