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INTERVIEW WITH TIM INGOLD (APRIL 2023)

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ABSTRACT

An interview with social anthropologist Tim Ingold, emeritus professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. The conversation covers different aspects of his work: the study of biology, his ties with Latin American anthropologists such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Cristián Simonetti, his perception of the ontological turn, archaeology, ethnography, among others.

Keywords: Anthropology; Archaeology; Ethnography; Ontology; South America; Theory.

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Cristopher C. González: I would like to start with what most caught my attention about your work as an anthropology student. A recurring theme in your work is the relationship between anthropology and biology. Examples of this are writings such as 'An Anthropologist looks at Biology', and more recently 'Evolution without Inheritance: Steps to an Ecology of Learning'. My first question is: What is your history with biology?

Tim Ingold: That's a big question. I suppose I should say that I grew up in a biological household, my father was a mycologist. I didn't like biology at school, but when I started off at university studying the natural sciences, one of the courses I took was on cell biology. So, I had some background in biology. And then later on, when I first started lecturing in Anthropology, I was teaching ecological anthropology, so there was a strong biological component right from the beginning. When I got my first job at the University of Manchester in 1974, I was given a course to teach called Environment and Technology, drawing on Cultural Ecology, a field that was then new to British social anthropology. In teaching this course, I felt I had to show that whatever we in anthropology have to say, about human beings and human societies, should at least be consistent with what evolutionary biologists and biological ecologists were saying about human organisms. There had to be a consistency between the biology and the anthropology. And so, for a long time I was trying to reconcile anthropological understandings of human personhood with understandings from evolutionary biology and behavioral ecology about how human organisms relate to their environments. I went on trying to do this until eventually, just before I wrote that paper on 'An Anthropologist Looks at Biology', I came to the conclusion that it can't be done, and that I would need to rewrite biology so that it accords with a more relational perspective. Thus, I eventually reached the point where I realized that the problem lay in mainstream biology itself. Ever since then, I've been looking for allies in biology, particularly in developmental biology, who could help me formulate a biology that would be consistent with what we know from anthropology about human beings and human relationships. So that's where I am. It's not an easy place to be, and I have had a lot of arguments with biologists, not all of them very constructive.

Cristopher C. González: And what is your perception of the current relation between anthropology and biology?

Tim Ingold: At the moment it is not good. Most biological anthropologists, as well as mainstream biologists, are still stuck in the mold of neo-Darwinian theory. It's a very conservative field, in which positions are hard to shift. Many of those working in this field seem to be living almost on another planet compared with sociocultural anthropologists who are predominantly based in the humanities. They are not really talking to one another, and it's difficult to establish a conversation. I've tried, but it rarely works. It seems to me that the best way to build a bridge with sociocultural anthropology would be to focus on developmental rather than evolutionary biology, since there are more common themes to address. Developmental biologists are more interested in the ways in which forms arise within fields of relationships, about the generation of form. The questions they ask are not so very different from those asked by social and cultural anthropologists. The tragedy, I think, is that the relationship between biological and social anthropology has historically revolved around questions of evolution. If instead it had turned on questions of development, we would have had a much more constructive conversation. That's why I've been trying to shift the focus from evolution to development. A lot of things are happening now in contemporary biology that are at last beginning to question the Darwinian mainstream, and seeking a better way to formulate the link between development and evolution. I'm fairly optimistic that biology will eventually be brought around to a more constructive way of thinking, and we can then begin to have a good conversation. But it is still being held back by a powerful and conservative element of neo-Darwinism. It might actually be more powerful in psychology than in biology, but a lot of work still has to be done to create a better conversation.

Cristopher C. González: Now, I would like to move on to another subject, about your relation with South American anthropology. You have engaged with the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in particular his theory of Amazonian perspectivism. And in 2020, Celeste Medrano and Felipe Vander Velden edited ¿Qué es un animal?, a clear reference to the book you edited in 1988, What is an animal?. ¿Qué es un animal? was dedicated to you, and you contributed to it with a preface. Can you tell me about your relationship with South American anthropology and ethnography?

Tim Ingold: I'll be very happy to do so, because I've developed a close affection for South American anthropology, and the people working in it. It started a long time ago, in the late 1990s. At that time, I was still based at the University of Manchester, and one of our research students was Javier Taks. Javier is from Uruguay, from Montevideo, and he did his PhD with us at Manchester under my supervision. It was a superb anthropological study of Uruguayan cattle-farmers. We remained in touch after Javier returned to Uruguay. I have visited the country three times, and love it very much. But later on, once I had moved to Aberdeen (in 1999) and launched a graduate program in anthropology there, we had two students come from South America in the same year. It must have been 2007 or 2008. One was César Giraldo Herrera, from Colombia; and the other, whom you know, was Cris Simonetti from Santiago. They were very different characters, with very different interests, but they were terrific students and I ended up supervising both of them. We had a great time. Through Cris, I developed contacts with Chile, in addition to my existing links with Uruguay. And then the Department started receiving visitors from Brazil. I'm struggling to remember now how it all began, but we had a stream of visitors coming from Brazil to our department in Aberdeen throughout the 2010s. We even organized a conference, held in Montevideo in February 2017 with funding from the British Council, involving anthropology staff and research students from Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Brazil's Sao Paulo state, as well as from Peru and Mexico, and of course colleagues from Scotland and more widely in the UK. So, I felt we were really building a sort of bridge – so many colleagues, including PhD students, were going backwards and forwards to and from the Southern Cone! I also visited there myself a few times. At the same time, I was trying to get people in different Latin American countries to start talking to one another, so as to get anthropologists in Chile talking to anthropologists in Uruguay and Argentina, and we were coordinating all of this from the other side of the world, in Scotland! Since I retired a few years ago, we've lost track of this connection a bit. Nevertheless, we developed a close link, partly through the doctoral students I supervised, including Javier, Cris and César, and partly through visitors to the department, as well as through my own visits to Montevideo, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Cordoba, Rio de Janeiro, Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Brasilia. In Porto Alegre, in 2011, there was even a special conference centered on my work. I was surprised and heartened to find so many resonances between Latin American anthropology and my own way of thinking.

Cristopher C. González: You have referred to Cristián Simonetti, a Chilean anthropologist now working at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, in Santiago. The two of you have collaborated on a project that resulted in a special issue of the journal Theory Culture & Society, under the title Solid Fluids: New Approaches to Materials and Meanings. Can you please comment on the experience of working with Cristián Simonetti?

Tim Ingold: It was a joy. Cris is a wonderful guy, and we go back a long way. It must have been around 2007 or 2008 when he arrived in Aberdeen as a research student, still very unsure of the direction in which he wanted to go, or where his real interests lay. But our ideas have evolved together over a long time, initially while I was his doctoral supervisor. Later, when he had finished his PhD, I managed to get funding from our university for a multidisciplinary research theme on The North, focusing on peoples and environments of the northern circumpolar region. We appointed Cris as a postdoctoral researcher under the theme, and because he was interested in ice, he travelled to

Greenland to do fieldwork among glaciologists and climate scientists. After that he returned to Chile to take up a position in Santiago, but we have continued to collaborate. In 2015 we received funding from the British Academy for a joint project, under what the Academy called its 'International Partnership and Mobility Scheme', intended to foster relationships between the UK and other countries: in this case the country was Chile. Our project was called Solid Fluids in the Anthropocene, and as part of that project, which ran from 2015 to 2019, we had a workshop here in Aberdeen. That was in August 2018. Cris came over from Chile for the event, and we were joined by a number of other invited colleagues. The special issue on Solid Fluids, to which you referred, emerged out of that workshop. But we are still working together. At the moment I'm collaborating with Cris, and also with Michel Lussault, from Lyon, France, on a co-edited volume on Urban Liquefaction. It is about the fluidity of the city, its watery nature. It started with an online workshop, held in June 2022. We are putting this book together at the moment. So, it's been a really great collaboration, and I hope it will continue for many years to come.

Cristopher C. González: Here in Chile, there is a growing feeling that archaeology and anthropology are distancing themselves from one another. In your work, you stress the unity of the intellectual project of anthropology, and you wish that social anthropology, physical anthropology, and archaeology could be more integrated. You have explored ways of restoring and promoting this integration. Can you comment on your thinking about the relation between anthropology and archaeology?

Tim Ingold: I've always thought that archaeology should be part of greater anthropology, in the sense that although the techniques we use might be different – anthropologists do ethnographic fieldwork, archaeologists excavate sites, so they approach things in different ways, and have different perspectives – the big questions about the nature of human life that anthropologists and archaeologists are addressing, particularly on the theoretical level, are the same. What above all connects the two disciplines of anthropology and archaeology are shared interests in time and in landscape. So, in principle, anthropologists and archaeologists should be working together; but in practice we've long had the same problem in Britain that you have mentioned in South America. We might talk in earnest about how good it is for disciplines to collaborate, but in practice the number of anthropologists I know in the UK who have systematically collaborated with archaeologists is very small. They could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Part of the problem is that anthropologists tend to equate their discipline with its method. They say: "What we do is ethnography." And archaeologists, for the most part, don't do ethnography. So long as you define a discipline by its way of operating, rather than by the big questions it asks, then archaeology and anthropology look completely different. One does ethnographic fieldwork, and the other excavates. But for my part, I don't believe anthropology is defined by a particular method. For me, anthropology is an inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world, and that inquiry can be conducted in all sorts of ways. Ethnographic fieldwork is one way, excavating sites is another way, and there are all sorts of other ways as well, including studies of language, history, in art and architecture, and so on. So, there are many ways in which we can address this general question of the conditions and possibilities of human life. And that, to me, is the anthropological question. I wish we could develop a greater sense of anthropology as a discipline that addresses what it means to live a human life in the world. I suppose you could say that this is really a philosophical question. But unlike philosophers, who tend to address it in the abstract, we would do it through actual engagements with people, with sites, with materials. It's sad that there are these divisions between the different subfields of anthropology and archaeology. We need to keep on working to bring them together again.

Cristopher C. González: I would like to return to my second question. You have engaged with anthropological material from South America. Could you talk about your relation with the work of Viveiros de Castro?

Tim Ingold: Oh, sorry, I had forgotten you asked about this.

Cristopher C. González: Don't worry.

Tim Ingold: I first met Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in the early 1990s, when he came to visit us in the Department of Social Anthropology at Manchester. At that time, he was still developing his theory of Amazonian perspectivism, while I was in the throes of rethinking the whole topic of relations between humans and nonhuman animals, so we had lots to talk about. In 1995, Eduardo invited me to speak on this topic – which was still somewhat novel in those days – at the ANPOCS conference in Caxambu, Brazil. Our common interests derived in part from the striking commonalities between peoples of the circumpolar North, which is my primary region of interest, and the Amazonian peoples with whom Eduardo has worked. You find what he would call perspectivism among both, often manifesting in similar ways. Though the logics of Amazonian societies and northern circumpolar societies are not identical, they share a lot of similarities, so that Eduardo's ideas fit quite well in the circumpolar North as well. But I am not myself completely convinced by them. The inversion of naturalism as perspectivism is so neat, it is almost Parisian. You can see in Eduardo not just the ethnographer but the Parisian intellectual who likes turning things upside down, making clever reversals. For me it is just too neat, too clever. The problem is that it leaves no room for ontogenetic development. The question I would ask is thus: "How does a child become a naturalist or a perspectivist?" It is all very well to pretend these are alternative ontologies, so that they are already there for people to pick up, readymade. Somehow, then, if you were a child brought up in Amazonia, you would develop an ontology of perspectivism. And if you were a child brought up in France, you would develop an ontology of naturalism. Why? Why this difference? Eduardo's scheme, which presents us with readymade alternatives, doesn't give us an answer to this question, except to say that the child is socialized into this ontology or that. But that doesn't work, because the whole theory of socialization rests on the foundation of a naturalist ontology. It assumes you start off with babies, as creatures of nature whose minds are a blank slate, and then imprint one ontology or another onto this mental substrate. That's why I have tried to shift from the emphasis on ontology – which you find in the work of scholars such as Martin Holbraad, who have followed Eduardo's lead in proposing what they call an ontological turn – to an emphasis on ontogeny. I don't really like the idea of turns, but if we must have a turn, then let it be ontogenetic rather than ontological! The trouble with the ontological turn is that it presents these alternative philosophies of being as though they were readymade, so that a child somehow ends up with one or the other. But if we focus on ontogeny, the question shifts from philosophies of being to generations of being. How do you become? Why do you start thinking in one way rather than another? What leads you to do that? How does this happen within the nexus of relations in which you find yourself? Could it be that if you are brought up in a tropical forest, among people who are largely dependent on cultivating crops, hunting animals, fishing or gathering plants, you are almost bound to think along perspectivist lines, simply because of the intensity of your experience with nonhuman beings of various kinds? These are the kinds of questions I want to ask, and I feel that in Eduardo's work they are sidestepped. The fact is that over the past twenty years or so, Eduardo and I have taken rather different paths, and we have not been in touch now for many years.

Cristopher C. González: What about ¿Qué es un animal?

Tim Ingold: It is great to see this question addressed again in a way that is deeply informed by experience and conversations with Indigenous peoples throughout South America, as well as by recent developments in anthropological theory. I had myself become interested in the topic of human-animal relations already in the late 1970s and early 80s, partly as a result of my own fieldwork among Sámi and Finnish reindeer herders in Lapland, and this culminated in my co-convening the series of themed sessions on 'Cultural Attitudes to Animals' at the World Archaeological Congress of 1986,

of which the edited volume What is an Animal? was one outcome. At that time, animals scarcely featured in anthropology or in any other discipline as living creatures in their own right. They were treated either as economic resources, to be exploited for food or other raw materials, or as symbolic resources on which people could draw to metaphorize their own social lives. In my preface to ¿Qué es un animal? I explain how the theme of human-animal relations was 'rediscovered' in the mid-1990s by the burgeoning academic industry of cultural studies which, ignoring decades of careful work by anthropologists and archaeologists on how people have lived – presently and in the past – with animals of different kinds, led to reams of tendentious literature, nearly all of it based on secondary sources, and written by self-styled 'cultural theorists' whose direct exposure to animals rarely extended beyond the household pet. Animals, in this literature, were creatures of discourse, not of life. I was so disillusioned by this 'animal turn', that I decided to cast my interests elsewhere. Since then, however, anthropology has returned to animals in new and much more interesting ways. And so I also find myself inexorably drawn back to the topic. What has changed is that we are more prepared to listen to what Indigenous people, in South America as elsewhere, are telling us about animals, and to take what they say as seriously as we would take the pronouncements of any western philosopher. The volume ¿Qué es un animal? is an excellent example.

Cristopher C. González: I see. Well, since you have brought up the ontological turn, let me raise a question to do with it. At least here, your work is sometimes put in the same box as the work of the main thinkers of the ontological turn. I know you are critical of it. I would like to know what you think of the development of this ontological turn. What's your perspective on it?

Tim Ingold: It's true that I am not keen on the ontological turn. This is partly because I was already there long before it began to be promulgated as a new turn, for example in my essay 'A circumpolar night's dream', which I originally wrote around 1997 (first published in my collection of essays The Perception of the Environment, in 2000). The essay not only engages with Eduardo's perspectivism but also anticipated just about everything in the ontological turn. Nor was I the first, since there were others, even working in Amazonia, notably the Swedish anthropologist Kai Århem, who had come up with similar ideas long before that. So, it is a bit annoying when ten years later Holbraad and the rest of them come up with this great manifesto for an ontological turn, as though they had invented it, when in fact it was already well established in my own and others' work. Why should I respectfully acknowledge these people who are putting forward something I had already proposed ages ago? So, that was part of it, just a kind of grumpiness. But partly, I think there's a real difference, after all, between my approach and that of the ontological turn. It is hard to put one's finger on the difference, because proponents of the turn are themselves so inconsistent. It isn't easy to figure out what they are really trying to say. The idea that there can be ontological differences – that the differences we've been accustomed to calling cultural, are actually differences of ontology – has been around in anthropology for decades. It's not new at all. As many critics point out, the ontological turn is merely "old wine in new bottles", as the saying goes. In the old days, we used to talk about people having different worldviews. People here would see the world in this way, people there in that way – we used to call these differences of culture. Nowadays we say: "These people have this ontology; those people have that ontology." We may have swapped epistemology for ontology, but nothing much has really changed. Perhaps it is all just a play on words. But there is also the problem of where we locate this ontology. Holbraad and the other 'ontological turners' argue that we shouldn't prejudge anything about people's ontology; we just let the ethnography speak for itself. People can come up with whatever ontology they like, and we should take that as our starting point. But the thing is that people don't go around talking ontology; they go around living their lives, and dealing with things as they come. As anthropologists we participate in these lives, and try to understand the ways of perceiving and acting they entail. In order to do that, we enroll philosophies of our own concerning how

human beings live and act in the world. The idea that we can simply come with a completely blank sheet, and that the ethnography speaks for itself, makes no sense. Some ontological turners have criticized me for having come pre-prepared with my own ontology. This is fundamentally animist, or vitalist. Rather than allowing the ethnography to speak for itself, these critics say, I am insisting, a priori, that we see things through animist or vitalist spectacles. But I don't see how we can do otherwise. After all, we're exploring the conditions and possibilities of human life in the world, and I don't see how you or anyone else can make these up. They are what they are, and we have to work from there. I dislike the idea of the 'turn' anyway. I guess every academic would like to be the author of their own turn, so that they can take the credit for having started it. It's a game of academic vanity, and I think we can do without it. Me, I just want to think things through! So yes, up to a point I think I was doing the ontological turn long before it was invented; I do not however accept that one can come with a blank sheet and let ethnography speak for itself.

Cristopher C. González: What are your views on the future of anthropological theory? Because the ontological turn is very popular right now, at least here in South America…

Tim Ingold: Yes?

Cristopher C. González: It's trendy…

Tim Ingold: I know, it is trendy, and that's the worst of it. Almost by definition, all turns will pass. Eventually something else will come up. In the 1980s everybody was a Marxist, and in the 1990s there were lots of phenomenologists, busily quoting Heidegger. But trends come and go, and people either follow them or not. The future I see for anthropology, however, is as the one discipline with the potential to reform the academy. What is special about anthropology – and here I agree with Eduardo, though I was saying it long before he did – is that it takes what others say seriously. In other words, instead of treating people in Amazonia or the circumpolar North, or wherever, as acting out their culture or their worldviews, we are being taught by them. When they say what they do, we listen not for what it reveals about their thought processes, but because what they say might be important to attend to and learn from. This is the difference between studying with people, and studying people merely for what it says about them. If you study with a professor in a university, you are not doing ethnography – you don't go to study with this professor in order to write them up; you study with them because you think you might learn something which will help you in later life. If we are to decolonize the academy, then the position we take when we study with our professors should be the same as that which we take when we study with anybody else in the world. So, when we do fieldwork, we are going to study with people, in order to learn from them. I think this is essential in the current crisis. We can't afford to disregard all the knowledge and all the wisdom that exists in the world. So, I see the future of anthropology as a discipline that addresses broad philosophical questions of how to live a human kind of life in the world. These are questions of how we know, act, perceive, remember, learn, form societies, deal with death, and so on. They are all philosophical questions, but instead of referring back to a philosophical canon, or to works by dead white philosophers, we actually talk to people, engage with them, and learn from doing so. That, I think, is the right way to go. For me, it's where the future of anthropology lies, in the recognition that anthropology is not, in itself, an ethnographic enterprise. I define anthropology as a generous, open-ended, comparative but nevertheless critical inquiry into the conditions and possibilities of human life, in this one world we all inhabit. But I'm a bit disheartened, since this is not what most of my anthropological colleagues are doing. They are having discussions among themselves, to which no-one else is listening. I think this has something to do with the professionalization of the discipline. Anthropologists are worried about defending their professional identity, so they earnestly talk to one another about 'anthropological

knowledge production'. But they are not really talking with anyone else, and that leads to a degree of isolation—which is not a good thing. At this moment I'm not sure where anthropology is heading. But I would like to see a future in which we don't have to decide between theory and ethnography, this is surely a false opposition. To study with people is neither theoretical nor ethnographic; it is something else altogether. Is a way of what I call 'knowing from the inside,' a different way of studying, which I think gets beyond the theory/ethnography opposition.

Cristopher C. González: You have referred to ethnography, and on your website, you say that you will become an ethnographer again. You plan to return to Finnish Lapland. How is that progressing?

Tim Ingold: I know it sounds contradictory. I turned my back on ethnography, and now I aim to return to it! The thing is that I did some fieldwork in Lapland in 1979-80. I wrote a few articles based on it but never wrote it up properly, because I got involved in too many other things. At that time, I wasn't quite sure what to do with my field material; it didn't seem to be going anywhere, and there were other things that caught my attention much more. I had been teaching ecological anthropology, and developing an interest in evolutionary theory. So, I went ahead with these, and put my fieldwork in Lapland to one side. But I owe it to the people there to write it up properly. The thing is that you can't do this kind of project without an open-ended period of time; it is impossible to fit it into something like a six-month sabbatical. But now that I'm retired, it becomes a possibility. I retired in 2018, and am still trying to clear my desk of all the other things I had to get finished first. I have all my fieldnotes here in my study. I'll need to go back and do some more fieldwork, and more archival research. It´s a long-term project that I hope to start maybe even by the summer of this year, certainly by the autumn. I want to put my theoretical, philosophical work to one side, and get back into this. After insisting for so long on distinguishing anthropology from ethnography, I am perhaps contradicting myself, or perhaps I don't really see this return to the field as anthropological at all. All I want to do is write a study, of this place and this people, without any grand theoretical ambitions. I have no idea how it is going to turn out. But it will be a change of direction for me, and it will take a while to get my head around it.

Cristopher C. González: To end this interview, my last question has to do with your current projects. You've already mentioned the co-edited volume with Cristián Simonetti and Michel Lussault. Are you currently working on anything else?

Tim Ingold: Well, I just finished a very short book—really an extended essay —called The Rise and Fall of Generations Now. It's about the way we think about human generations and how we need to think about them differently. You have read my article in Current Anthropology ('Evolution Beyond Inheritance: Steps to an Ecology of Learning') which stems from the same idea. Instead of thinking of generations as layered on top of one another, each supplanting the one before, I want to think of them as overlapping, and carrying on their lives together. This was the key theme of my CA article. The book is a development of this idea. I finished it at the end of January, and completed some revisions a few weeks ago, so it is now officially in the press. It will come out in November or December of this year. So, that's now done, apart from proof-checking and indexing. Right now I'm catching up on a lot of little things. One of them is the book on Urban Liquefaction that I'm working on with Cris and Michel. And there's one other thing. A few years ago, I put together a book called Correspondences, consisting of lots of very brief essays, many of them written in response to artworks, exhibitions and things like that. I finished it just before the pandemic started, in February 2020, and it came out the following autumn. Since then, I've been asked to write many more of these little essays, mostly by artists, some very famous, others virtually unknown. I have enjoyed writing them, because they are not meant as academic essays; I merely have an idea and write about it. By now, I almost have enough

for another book. So, I plan to put together a new collection, which I'll call Scribblings. I'll probably do that in the coming autumn. So that's another project. In all, then, there's the book with Cris and Michel to finish, the book on generations to come out, and the Scribblings book to do, but then I hope to return to Finland and to continue with my field and archival research there.