



INTERVIEW

WITH CHRISTINA TOREN

How to make categories work analytically *por Susana Durão*

Análise Social, 203, XLVII (2.º), 2012

ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

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INTERVIEW

How to make categories work analytically

Interview with Christina Toren by Susana Durão

Christina Toren is today one of Europe's foremost socio-cultural anthropologists. She was born in Australia and has lived for some time now in the UK. She is Professor at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, Department of Social Anthropology (School of Philosophical, Anthropological and Film Studies). Coming from Psychology, she proved to be a brilliant PhD candidate in Anthropology. Her 1986 thesis received the Robert Mackenzie Prize, awarded by the London School of Economics for the best Doctoral Dissertation across all departments. It was later published as an LSE monograph entitled *Making Sense of Hierarchy. Cognition as Social Process in Fiji*, (Athlone, 1990)

Over the years she has developed a close relationship to Lusophone anthropology, engaging in, among other things, an annual joint meeting that brings together professors and students of the postgraduate programs in Social Anthropology of the Portuguese ICS/UL, the Brazilian Museu Nacional (UFRRJ), and the Scottish University of St. Andrews. She has undertaken long-term fieldwork in the Fiji Islands (Sawaieke, Gau) since the 1980s, having revisited her field a number of times. She brought theoretical innovations to anthropological thinking in the area of kinship and ideas of personhood, the analysis of ritual, and ontogeny as an historical process. She has been a prominent researcher in Europe, participating in several editorial boards of the leading peer-reviewed journals of social anthropology.

It is worth mentioning some of her stimulating recent work, such as *What is Happening to Epistemology?* (Special issue edited by Christina Toren and João de Pina-Cabral. *Social Analysis*. Volume 53, Issue 2, 2009) republished by Berghahn as a book in 2011 under the title *The Challenge of Epistemology: Anthropological Perspectives*; and the wide-ranging discussion of Adam Kuper's work *Culture Wars. Contexts, Models and Anthropologists' Accounts* (Edited by Deborah James, Evie Plaice, and Christina Toren. New York: Berghahn, 2010) From the beginning, Toren has been keen to demonstrate that, provided it is undertaken in tandem with a social analysis, the study of how children make sense of the peopled world can provide answers to vexed anthropological questions. For a recent example see, "The stuff of imagination: what we can learn from Fijian children's ideas about their lives as adults" (*Social Analysis* Volume 55, Issue 1, 23-47, 2011).

I met Christina in Lisbon, where she was living during the second semester of 2011, while enjoying a sabbatical leave. We shared several lunches at the ICS/UL cafeteria back then, all-leading

to a particularly intimate interview on one fine spring day. At that time we discussed her work, feelings, and beliefs about anthropology-making, time and fieldwork, description and analysis, shared emotions, and knowledge. Ultimately, our joint concern was to reach an understanding concerning how best to nurture this plural discipline of ours.

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SUSANA DURÃO *I'd like to begin with a question that really intrigues me. How and why did you move from Psychology into Anthropology?*

CHRISTINA TOREN Well, it was a combination of things. I was doing Psychology as an undergraduate – at University College London – and they had a fantastic Psychology department (which they still have), a hardcore experimental department. I was fascinated by it all but, at the same time, I had this sneaking suspicion that there was something wrong with the way that they were doing the research. And that especially seemed to be the case when we started reading cross-cultural Psychology, because even though I knew nothing about it really, it seemed highly suspicious to me that when you used Piagetian tasks to test some group of adults in Africa, they didn't score as well as Swiss school children. I couldn't understand how that could be the case. I figured it didn't have to do with the subject groups but rather with the way the research was conceived. So, there was that. And my suspicions got worse during the time I was an undergraduate. It also happened that somebody had once told me that you could do anything in Anthropology. That was literally the sentence: "You can do anything in Anthropology." So I thought to myself that if that was true, then perhaps I could do what I wanted to do in Anthropology. I was studying for my finals at the time this thought came to me and I walked out of the library of Senate House, down the road to the LSE [London School of Economics], went in to see the post graduate convener and said "I don't know anything about Anthropology but I'm interested in psycholinguistics, child development, and so on..." And that was that, really.

SD *So you already had child development in mind?*

CT No, the truth is I didn't. At the time, I was really interested in psycholinguistics and cognition and, of course, cognitive development is part of that.

SD *And what were your main theoretical influences and with whom did you work?*

CT Well, my supervisor at the LSE was Maurice Bloch and he was interested in cognition and knowledge and so on. During my qualifying year (which I had to do after the Psychology degree, to enable me to do my doctorate in Anthropology) Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* was THE thing that

everybody had to read and everybody found it infuriating because, by and large, they couldn't fully understand what it was about. I always feel annoyed with things that I can't understand, so I'm always determined to make sure that I know what they mean. So I made myself an expert on *habitus*: "a set of structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures" as Bourdieu says. If you're thinking like a psychologist, that makes sense. You can think of "a set of structured structures predisposed to act as structuring structures". But you've got to set them in motion, haven't you? And I realised at the time that *habitus* didn't work because it wasn't internally dynamic. It wasn't intrinsically transformational. I didn't really know what exactly to do about it. I thought, however, that it was an interesting idea. More especially, there is a point where Bourdieu, in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, is talking about how people become enchanted by ideas they themselves have made, and I still think that that is a fantastically useful insight, because it's true of us all.

So Bourdieu was a big influence. I was thinking about these things and how I was going to do my own fieldwork and if you're coming from a psychology background, then child development is a fairly obvious way. It stuns me that people haven't seen that before: to find out how people become enchanted by ideas they themselves have made you look at how they constitute those ideas over time, you look at children. But, if you're an anthropologist, you can't do that without doing the full social analysis at the same time, which is why what I do is so different from what a psychologist does.

SD *But what about Bourdieu's field theory?*

CT I never thought it worked. After *Outline of a Theory of Practice* he tried to make the *habitus* work better, but all he succeeded in doing was to build more and more complicated relations between different orders of concepts. No, you want to have a theory that is essentially quite simple. It's much easier then to break it down and look at the constituent processes that make the theory work.

SD *And after that, you came across the work of Maturana and Varela.*

CT Yes, that was much later. When I did my doctorate, I took Piaget and put his theory of genetic epistemology together with Bourdieu's and I made the *habitus* work by making it transformational. Maturana and Varela I got onto later. I knew about Maturana because he'd written a paper that I'd read and thought brilliant when I was an undergraduate psychology student. And it was important to me that anthropologists work with theories that were biologically viable. As an anthropologist you've got to work, in effect, on every front: you have to produce a social analysis, you have to know that your social analysis works psychologically, and you can't violate what is known about human biology.

So, if you're going to fulfil all those demands simultaneously, then you have to have a way of having these things map beautifully onto one another. And Maturana and Varela are terrific because their fundamental notion is that the structure of the organism structures what the world can be for it. Now, I think a lot of biologists think that, but the idea of *autopoiesis* is really Maturana's... He may have had precursors, I'm not sure I know enough to be sure, but he very probably did, because one always does! But he certainly developed the idea.

WHAT MAKES AN ANTHROPOLOGIST?

SD *From your point of view, what is it that makes an anthropologist in the first place?*

CT What makes an anthropologist? That's a good question. I suppose most anthropologists I know have a fascination for a particular region of the world. So they tend to go into anthropology because they have that area interest. They're riveted by it: I don't know, South Asia, say. I think a lot of people come in through that route: they have a real desire to understand how you can be human in different ways and they're interested in a particular region. I wasn't like that, though. I was – and still am – fascinated by human beings in all forms. So I suppose what I want is an explanation of human beings that makes sense to me. That desire led me into anthropology because it was clear to me that I was – psychologists were – leaving out a huge amount. Of course, once you go into Anthropology, you *really* see how much psychologists are leaving out. And then the problem gets restructured, if you like, because one has to arrive at a social analysis at the same time as one is trying to understand how psychological processes are constituted. And one is also treating the people one is working with in the same way as one would want to be treated oneself. Then one has a big problem: to find out how to make all of that work.

SD *It's not easy. Well, but how did you start thinking with the notion of the person as a locus of relationship?*

CT That is really a Fijian idea. I don't think of myself as a locus of relationship.

SD *You don't?*

CT No, no. You'd think that I would, but I don't. How can I? Even though I pour scorn on the idea of the individual and I certainly don't think of myself as an individual. At the same time, I don't exactly think of myself as a locus of relationship either. I've had too long a history of taking for granted the autonomy of the individual, that we place so much store by, to actually think like that. But I do think that we are intersubjectively constituted, which is a different matter. But you can see how intersubjectivity looks like a person is a locus of

relationship. The two ideas are much closer to one another than either is to the idea of the individual. In the Fijian idea of the person – and I suppose this is where it is different – you are what you are given to be in relation to other people. That’s why the person is the locus of relationship. With us, of course, you’re endlessly resistant to being what other people “give you” to be: “No, I’m not like that! No, No. No.”

SD *That’s interesting...*

CT I think so. That’s just occurred to me, but I think so. I hadn’t thought about it before. Thinking about it now, however, I do think that that is probably the difference.

SD *From that point of view, does this relational person depend on the effective link between Anthropology and Psychology (as you argue in one of your recent papers) or can we look for it elsewhere, let’s say, between Anthropology and Sociology? To put it another way, how do you talk to sociologists?*

CT I don’t have any problem talking to sociologists. There’s plenty of good work by sociologists. I don’t really make the Anthropology and Sociology distinction. For me, it’s not a strong disciplinary distinction because, after all, Anthropology has certainly been strongly influenced by sociologists: Durkheim, Weber, Mauss, Parsons... Whether the influence has gone in the other direction, I don’t know, but I assume so because, after all, there’s a whole school of sociologists who claim to do ethnography. And then, of course, there are other sociologists who think ethnography is nonsense. I just ask myself “Has this person something interesting to say?” Of course, I read George Herbert Mead as a psychology undergraduate and it was the only thing I read in the realm of social psychology that made me think: “Yeah, that’s really clever.” And he was a sociologist, wasn’t he? And you can think about all of those famous studies, by Goffman for example.

SD *From that place in Chicago.*

CT Berger and Luckmann, also. So, for me, it’s not really a question of Sociology or Anthropology; it’s really a question of does this work have something interesting to tell me or does it not?

PEOPLE INSTANTIATE HISTORY

SD *I am curious about how you work on the big scales in your anthropology, like, for instance, government or parliament in Fiji?*

CT Well, there is currently no functioning parliament in Fiji; it’s a dictatorship. But, let’s say we’re talking about the olden days when I first worked there, when

it was indeed a parliamentary democracy. Well, as a social anthropologist, in general you have no choice but to go in through actual, living people. So if you had wanted to do a study of government you could have worked with people who were parliamentarians. Parliament would have been made up at that time of indigenous Fijians, Fiji Indians – in a rough balance – and some people of European and other origins, Chinese perhaps. You could have done a study with those people to understand what they thought they were doing, couldn't you? But you would get a very different view if you were looking at what were the voters' ideas about government. And I think for us, as analysts, that is the only way to do it – to work with those in government and those who elect them; because, really, nobody has privileged access to government, except in the narrow sense. Those people who are voters, or those who are ruled, they have to accept the government, don't they? Otherwise it's not going to work. But their ideas of what is happening may be very different from the ideas of the people who actually constitute the government; and the ideas of the different factions within the government are going to be different too. In the Fijian case, you would have had to analyse how the ideas and practices of those in parliament linked into indigenous Fijian ideas about chiefship and the Fijian political economy on the one hand and, on the other, into the political economy as lived by Fiji Indians. Very divergent. But I don't see any other way of doing it.

SD *I see what you mean. You work with history, so that's a way to do it.*

CT Well, I think it's the way to do it if you hold that people instantiate history. You have to understand that you and I sit here talking to one another evincing our history. That's what we're doing from moment to moment: we cannot help but evince our past. It's a complex past that comes down to us through our relations with other people. That's how we come to instantiate it – through our relations with others – that's the only way. Even in the case of the law, for example, how the law informs what I do (or don't do) is a function of the sense I make of my relations with all those others who, in one way or another, are telling me or showing me what “the law” is.

SD *So your idea of cognition is of something inside individuals. Not like the idea of “knowledge”.*

CT Yes, if you like. I try to avoid “knowledge”. I don't talk “knowledge” on the whole. On the whole, I don't use that sort of vocabulary.

SD *Yes. You don't use autonomous concepts. Concepts that, in a sense, “go by themselves”.*

CT Yes, that's right actually. Except in so far as I'm trying to analyse them ethnographically through what I'm getting from other people.

SD *Exactly, and that's nice because it's very... how shall I put it? It's very sincere.*

CT It is an attempt to go as far as you can go with the categories of the people you are working with. You take these categories to their absolute limit. You make them work analytically, which is really different from interpretation.

SD *That's a good point: making categories work analytically is different from interpretation. How is it different?*

CT It's a double move because initially as the anthropologist, of course, you have your own categories and you meet the categories of those people you are working with. Mind you, I think it's really important to stress that the people you are working with might be the people next door. They could be people who, in effect, you've known all your life. So it's no different if you're working really close to home or if you're working with people whose history is very, very different from your own. So, first of all, you're interpreting. You're making sense for yourself of what those people are doing and saying, aren't you? So you can say that's an act of interpretation that enables you to get a handle on what's going on. But if you want to make people's categories work analytically, you have to be able to show how those categories really do have a purchase on the world. How they really do tell you what's happening in the world. It doesn't make sense to say, of the Fijians I work with, for example, that they believe in God. God is an absolute given. The question of belief, is neither here nor there. You confirm that God exists and that has to do with the idea of power as immanent in the world and not somewhere else, somewhere far-off. So you have to be able to show how those ideas really do have a purchase on the world. It's the only way I can say it and it's a really hard thing to do because these ideas can't be precisely the same for you, except insofar as you are convinced as the analyst they are constitutive of the world as lived by others. Do you get what I mean?

SD *Yes, I think so. Those "intermediary categories", as we may say, you don't believe very much in them, do you?*

CT No. I mean, they have a kind of convenience for us, don't they? They are in common parlance. After all, I use them in my day to day life, of course.

SD *Technocratic categories?*

CT Or political, or religious, what have you. Yes, but how those domains, those categories are constituted is what is interesting to me. You could do a study. I would love to see somebody do this (and somebody probably has, at some time), you could do ethnographic studies of how our children constitute categories that we take for granted: culture, nature, religion, politics, mind.

SD *Bodies...*

CT Bodies, whatever. I suppose we do talk about bodies, don't we? And, certainly nature and culture we talk about. They're out there.

SD *Yes, certainly. This is also a kind of methodological perspective.*

CT Yes, it is. It is both. The method and the theory are aspects of one another. I don't think that there is any way, ultimately, of showing how categories come to have a purchase on the world, unless you do it developmentally. Meaning you have to work always with children as well as adults. Because the problem with adults is that they are, by and large, the finished product. They're pretty sure about the way the world works. Of course, up to a point, everybody says that they don't know this or they don't know that. True; but at the same time they don't question the earth under their feet. There's a whole load of things taken for granted. We all do take most everything for granted, me included. We'd be mad if we didn't. I mean it literally: we would be mad.

SD *It's not possible.*

CT Exactly; it's not possible. So you walk around in the world and fundamentally you take the world for granted, and it's that "taken for granted" that fascinates me. Because you get to see that your "taken for granted" is not the same as that other person's, and that other person can be this person, right here.

SD *Today I was talking to a policeman and he was talking about "men" in the corporation and about how important it is not to use stereotypes. And he kept saying "men" and I said, "If you mean that, please don't say 'men': say 'people!'"*

CT Good. Did he get it?

MIND, MATERIALITY, AND HISTORY

SD *There are so many things taken for granted. But I am wondering: how do we teach this in our classes? These assumptions and insights?*

CT Well, I do it by getting students to read as much as possible and by drawing out in discussion the implications of what they're reading. I think that students quite often think I'm dogmatic. They say to me, "Why don't you teach other theories?" And I say, "But the world is filled with all your other theories. You're reading the other theories all the time. Other theories rule." Which they do: Social Construction rules; Cultural Construction rules. But, by and large, students don't see that these ideas are challengeable. They take them so much as being okay that getting them to see that they have questionable underpinnings is very, very difficult because all the basic component ideas are deeply

entrenched: individual/society; biology/culture; mind/body. You know, a lot of it is really “unthought”.

SD *Not to mention representation.*

CT Yes. Representation is a good example. It is difficult for people to see that representation is questionable, theoretically speaking. Anyway, the point is that when they get hold of my idea of mind, if they do get it, it really is so obvious that they tend to think that they knew it all along. So then, I disappear. It's true. I disappear and they reshape the thing for themselves.

SD *But, how is that possible?*

CT Well it's possible, of course, because if you consider it, you think: “Oh well, what did she do, really? Well, she put together this, this, this, and this.” Because that's, in a way, all you really need to do once you've actually understood; once you've really got it: that in literally every respect humans instantiate the history they have lived. Then you just have to make the thing work, don't you? And how do you do that? Well, you do it via Maturana, Varela, Husserl for historicity, Merleau Ponty... It seems very easy to do. And now Evan Thompson has come out with this wonderful book, in which he has done a great job on the biology-psychology dimensions of human being. He retains the biology-culture distinction – unfortunately, but all the rest of it is working beautifully; and he comes, of course, with an influence from Varela, who was Maturana's co-writer.

SD *Did you ever talk to Maturana about this area?*

CT No.

SD *They are not familiar with your work?*

CT Not to my knowledge; I'd be stunned if they were. I've heard Maturana speak. He's a wonderful speaker. Varela is dead.

SD *Moving on to the area of language. I read this in your *Laughter and Truth and I really loved it: “To understand a language is also to understand native speakers' ideas about what speech does and the conditions that render it good and right. And here it is important to be aware of the process through which native speakers constitute an idea of the moral force that is given in ritualized aspects of language use.” I am fascinated by this idea of moral force.**

CT Good, I'm glad that you like that because, again, that's a domain of research where somebody who's a linguist *and* an anthropologist – you'd have to be both – would be able to do a fantastic study if they were willing to look closely at child language acquisition. There's a very good paper by Allan Rumsey, in

which there are real elements of that. He's not looking at the moral force of language exactly, but the work bears on the same territory.

SD *How do we learn how to become ourselves in relation to others? One of the greatest things in your work is the way you combine different dimensions of human and social life.*

CT "Oneself in relation to others"? Well, that's not a Fijian idea, is it? And this is the thing about being careful about details. Humans are endlessly thinking about themselves in relation to others, in one way or another. The self as a locus of relationship is just one, because there are numerous ways that we can think about this.

SD *This idea you share with us: "knowing the world by being part of it, experiencing it". This theory of the embodied mind so well expressed in the book, *Mind, Materiality and History: Explorations in Fijian Ethnography* makes us wonder that there is not the "before-or-after-move-of-knowledge-acquisition" (that is implicit in the socio-centred view of the human). Would you say you may be looking for new theories of human action? Does this make any sense?*

CT In a way, yes. Although I probably wouldn't put it that way exactly. You know how in Anthropology, there's a whole problem about objects. Well, that doesn't make any sense to me at all. Because if you look from my position, then any given human being is constantly bringing the world into being for him or herself; including everything that's in it. So, I objectify aspects of the world throughout my continuing life; and I may objectify an aspect to make use of it or just to notice it, or what have you. But I don't see that as a very great problem, it seems obvious to me.

SD *Objects are a problem, for instance, to Bruno Latour.*

CT Yes. So, I can objectify an aspect of the world and elaborate it, perhaps, for all kinds of purposes. After all, humans do that all the time. And I don't find that particularly problematic. What is interesting to me is to chart the process through which that occurs. To me, what's really important is that that process of making sense of things is so given to human beings and so normal, and so ordinary that people who are concerned about these sorts of things don't actually realize how stunningly powerful it is. So, for example, when I was younger (and I don't know if people still talk about it, psychologists probably do), people used to discuss endlessly violence on television and what effect this would have on our children. As if it wouldn't have an effect on your children! Because it is absolutely obvious to me that if you see something and you are willy-nilly making sense of it because you have no choice, it will have an effect

on you. What the nature of that effect is, we don't know. You would have to do the other studies to find out; but, certainly, it is informing your being. There's no doubt about it. And if you think of the degree, of the incredible amount of violence, the incredible amount we see day-in, day-out in all kinds of forms everywhere – that cannot be good for you.

I think if you can really understand and build it into your analysis that humans instantiate history, you enter into an entirely different theoretical space; and your task is a different one. If you can actually show people how that works, that seems potentially revolutionary to me. But you would have a hell of a time getting people to see it, because if you take a group of philosophers, for example, and you say to them, "Humans instantiate their history; they are literal instantiations of their history", they'll go, "Yeah, yeah." They don't have any problem with that. But neither do they have any idea, apparently, of what the implications of that observation are. So they don't, for instance, think to themselves immediately, "Oh my God! If that's true then we have to understand how that's happening." No. I mean, clearly, people like Husserl did, but they occupy a small niche of their own.

COGNITION AND EMOTION

SD *Can you tell us more about how cognition and emotion combine in your work?*

CT Well, I don't have them separate. I seriously do not have them separate. All cognitions have an "affect aspect" to them and emotion, so-called, is going to take in absolutely everything, from the sheer fact of my being interested, to my being bored, to my being enraged, to my being in love. It takes in absolutely everything, so cognition and emotion are not two separate domains for me. Psychologists know they're not, but it's interesting that, nevertheless, that separation continues. Damasio did a very good job of showing that emotion is intrinsic to everything about human beings. I'm not happy about his idea of the proto-self, however. I find all those ideas that entail 'levels of integration' sort of irritating and not at all explanatory. But that idea about emotion being integral to all human behaviour and to consciousness – the feeling of what happens – that is really clever.

SD *And it has political implications for some people. For some people, it would be better if we could separate sometimes cognition from emotion.*

CT Yes, I see what you're saying but you simply can't hold to that separation. It's been a long time since we've been able to hold to that. Psychologists gave it up years ago, and they are the slowest to give things up. So, when they've given it up, everyone else had to do so too.

SD *In your text, “All things go in pairs”, you seem to choose Hegel over Dumont; and you explain very vividly how in the Fiji Islands “balanced reciprocity and competitive equality are as salient, and as important, as tribute and hierarchy. Hierarchy and equality are in tension with one another and depend on one another for their very continuity.” Would you say this constitutive tension can be found almost anywhere and may even be important for understanding human relations and ideas about the person in countries like the UK, France, or Portugal?*

CT Hmmm. It’s an ethnographic question. Fijians are determined dualists and, therefore, they figure largely in Levi-Strauss’ work. And that saying: “All things go in pairs or the sharks will bite”, I love that, brilliant. But I do think it’s an ethnographic question; because although you might want to say that dualism is simply given to human beings and everyone is a dualist, sorting out how it works is always going to be a matter for analysis. It’s not something that you can take for granted without doing the work.

SD *And time helps you to make sense of things...*

CT For example, in my PhD I made use of a distinction between the literal and symbolic, which I completely dropped when I did the book. It’s amazing how you can feel really uneasy about something and continue and continue and continue using it. And then, when you actually give it up, fantastic!

SD *It’s a relief.*

CT It’s an incredible relief. Not only did you really not need it; things are a lot easier to understand without it.

SD *But you still see that in our curriculum: the differentiation between the economic and the symbolic.*

CT Yes. Well, it’s interesting to work out how a distinction like that is arrived at. Again, it’s a developmental thing, because kids start out with a taken-for-granted, literalist attitude. They’re not consciously making any distinction between the literal and the symbolic, they take what they know from their experience to be given in the nature of the world. But they’ve got to arrive at a point where they discover that appearances may have a layer of deeper meaning – the symbolic. And once they’ve achieved that then the thing is born: they’ve got it. They have become enchanted. And the ideas they’ve made themselves become coercive.

SD *Coercive?*

CT Yes, because the appearances (whatever they may be – say, ways of behaving “correctly”) have become symbolic of a deeper meaning. And once you’ve

arrived at that deeper meaning, then you know that you have to show some respect. It's incumbent upon you to behave "according to the rules". And then, of course, you have to tell your children to behave like this and behave like that; and to do this and to do that, because that behaviour is symbolic of... whatever – class position, perhaps. So it's not that the distinction between the literal and the symbolic doesn't exist, it exists; but finding it out is a developmental issue and an ethnographic one rather than somehow given in the nature of the world.

- SD *That's interesting because the other day I was thinking, "What is a rule after all?" We have to deal with this question permanently.*
- CT I think that's how you define ritual. And that's not from me; I got that from Gilbert Lewis. In *Day of Shining Red* he makes this observation that anthropologists are always able to identify rituals. Why? Because when people tell you that the thing they're doing has to be done in a certain way, that there are rules about it, then you know you're dealing with ritual. And once you've got that aspect of behaviour - the aspect *that people say* is governed by rules – this is its ritualized aspect. So if you're looking at ritualized aspects of language use, they are things like, the cadence of your voice in certain situations or your use of a "correct" vocabulary or pronunciation. These are ritualized aspects of language use, aren't they? Politeness has all of that in it, doesn't it? So, you're not allowed to be too vehement; you're not allowed to raise your voice, you must not swear, or use slang or whatever. There are many subtle aspects of language use that are ritualized. They're the bits that conform to what people tell you should be done; or that they can render explicit as a rule. How to begin and end a telephone call, for example. You don't just launch in, do you?
- SD *And that's something you learn gradually. It's developmental, as you say.*
- CT And one of the things is that you look to see how other people behave, don't you? If you go into a thing that you don't know – if you've got any sense – you check.

CHILDREN STUDIES

- SD *At some point you came up with the idea that you had to develop ethnographic studies of ontogeny.*
- CT I came up with it very early on because this goes back to the idea "How do you become enchanted by an idea you have yourself made?" When I went into the field, I was interested in big ideas – God, the individual, democracy. You know, these sorts of ideas. How do you come to take it for granted that democracy is the only possible form of government?

SD *You had this in mind?*

CT Oh, yes. But how to find out? Well, the only way is to study children alongside studying adults. You can't take for granted that you know what the children are doing, which is usually the case in psychological studies, because they take everything for granted except the process. It's like, "How do they get from here to there?" Psychologists tend not to think that the idea they are looking at is itself *not* to be taken for granted. And that was one of Piaget's brilliant insights: that he asked the right questions. If the categories of time, space, and so on are not inborn – if they have to be constituted – then how does that happen? Of course, psychologists have shown that neonates and infants have abilities at their disposal that seem to put paid to Piaget's ideas. Whenever you say the word "Piaget" to people, you can see this going through their minds. By and large, if they know about Piaget, they also think they know that everything that he said is no longer useful. Except for those people who are neo-Piagetians – and there's a large school of psychologists who are – they understand that you've got to look at how concepts are constituted over time and they realize that they don't need the notion of intellectual predispositions. Of course, I'm not a full-on Piagetian. The key thing for me was his idea of the cognitive scheme as a self-regulating transformational system. It fits perfectly with *autopoiesis*.

SD *And phenomenology is the other entrance.*

CT Yes, exactly.

SD *When you say that we have to have a model of the human being that is phenomenologically valid, are you saying that Anthropology relies on in-depth Ethnography? Let's put it another way. Do you think the only way to do Anthropology is to do really rigorous, long-term fieldwork followed by ethnographic analysis?*

CT By and large. I think you have to do that. Of course, the conditions have become more and more difficult: students are not allowed enough time to do their PhDs, for example. Yes, I do think so. I think that unless you do long-term fieldwork, your own ideas will never be thrown into question. That's really it; and that is going to be true if you do your fieldwork down the road, like you did; or if you do it in some place that is totally exotic to you. Mind you, there are some situations in which I think you would never be able to do participant observation because you wouldn't be allowed. Now, there are ways of getting 'round that situation, such as "repeated interviewing". So you go back and back and back and back. And that then throws up all kinds of inconsistencies and shifts and subtleties; but if you can do participant-observation, then that's best. Otherwise, ethnographic analysis becomes incredibly difficult. I don't know

how you would ever arrive at really questioning your own “taken granted” unless you do long-term fieldwork. The method forces you. As a participant observer, you can’t pretend to respect other people, because they’ll know that you don’t. Participant-observation, and you know this from your own experience, absolutely requires you to respect the people you’re working with. I don’t know how you would manage otherwise, because you’d never arrive at knowing what they know.

SD *But with the proposition of a unified model of the human being, might we be able to generalize again and offer the world an anthropological theory?*

CT Yes, I think that mine is an anthropological theory. Well, from my point of view, the reason why it’s good is because, yes, it’s a fundamental theoretical position, but it doesn’t tell you what you’re going to find out. If you start from that position and you really do the ethnographic analyses; then, yes, I reckon you wind up with stuff that is genuinely explanatory and that provides for comparison; and that has to be a good thing.

SD *You have a very open idea of what history is. It’s not the history that we are familiar with.*

CT No, it’s humans as instantiations of history. But this idea does not originate with me. Marx knew this, so did Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and many another – Castoriadis. But if it’s true; if we are all instantiations of history, then history is not a thing outside us. It’s not what is written in the history books, it’s what is lived, what is carried in the present by living people and it is fantastically powerful; because in everything that I do, I am informed by my past and I cannot step out of it. Now if that is the case, then entrenched political problems take on a different cast. They present a different kind of problem and they’re certainly not to be solved by the idea that you can just go in and change some bad situation into a good one. Or, for example that you can get people suddenly to realize that democracy is what they’ve always wanted.

BEING IN FIJI

SD *Can you tell us about the daily experience in Fiji?*

CT That would be another whole interview! Okay, yes, I do have something to say about that. I think and say to students – and I think everybody who does participant-observation comes to recognize this – that participant-observation is a form of life. You start off thinking it’s a method and, of course, you continue with it because you systematically write down the things that you do and the things that people say and the things that people are doing; and you

map spaces and you draw diagrams and you do all of this sort of stuff. So, yes, you are doing all of that; but the truth is that what you're doing on a day-to-day basis is living with people: that's why it's called participant-observation. And you have real relations with real other people. And I think it's important to understand that that's what happens in long-term fieldwork. And it's true, I think, for everybody who does long-term fieldwork. So, in other words, you're living with people. It's different. If you are working as a participant-observer, you would be living there alongside people, and you would develop relations with them: as colleague, as teacher-student, as friend, as person above or below them in the hierarchy, etc., etc.

SD *And this is a very interesting way of seeing that participant-observation is not a naïve project.*

CT No, it's hard. If you're going to be good at it, it's really hard. This is why there's so much bad ethnography out there. People think it's easy but it's actually difficult. How do you get to be good at it? You only get to be good at it by obsessively writing field notes; because if you don't do that, you will never become a good observer. The more field notes you write, the more you see, the more telling your observations become. The first field notes you write are not very good because you're not good at observing. You only become really good in that process of observing and writing, and nobody can teach you. You have to do it yourself, there's no other way. And the people who think that this is easy go in there, come back with very superficial stuff, write crappy things and get all the rest of us a bad reputation.

ARE WE DUAL?

SD *To finish with "Intersubjectivity as Epistemology", which I would say is one of your most candid and simple articles. But, at the same time, it is one of the most ambitious. Is this a recent preoccupation, to make yourself clearer and pleasant reading and at the same time being able to visit, as an anthropologist, the hard theories of the human mind? Is it possible to put it like this?*

CT Well, you can put it that way if you like. It has never been an ambition of mine to write beautifully, but I do strive for clarity. I think that's important. Of course, it may not be a very good idea, because I think that, very often, people admire obscurity.

SD *"Admire obscurity"?*

CT Yes, I think that the more people have to struggle to work out what somebody meant, the more important they think it is. Bourdieu is a good example,

Latour is a good example, Deleuze is a good example; there are endless good examples.

SD *But Lévi-Strauss is not a good example.*

CT No, Lévi-Strauss is, by and large, very clear. There's no doubt about it.

SD *And beautiful.*

CT And beautiful.

SD *Well, perhaps we are "dual", in a way.*

CT Maybe. (laughs).