

# ANTHROPOLOGY MATTERS JOURNAL

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## **'We don't just live in a connected-up world—our discipline gives us tools to see it with'**

**An interview with Marilyn Strathern**

*Nora Coman*

*Ruoyu Qu*

*Sally Fitzpatrick*

*Imke van Bentum*

*In this written interview from 29 October 2022, four bachelor's students studying cultural anthropology at the University of Göttingen (Sally Fitzpatrick, Ruoyu Qu, Nora Coman, and Imke van Bentum) interviewed Professor Dame Marilyn Strathern, an emeritus Professor in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, about her research on sociality and gift exchange, gender relations, kinship, intellectual property, audit culture, and bioethics. Strathern is known for her groundbreaking work in feminist anthropology, as well as her research focusing on Papua New Guinea and Great Britain. She has also written extensively on the anthropology of science and technology and the ways in which these fields shape our understanding of the world. Her work is known for its theoretical and ethnographic complexity, which often draws on insights from philosophy and other disciplines.*

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## INTERVIEW

To Nora Coman, Ruoyu Qu, Sally Fitzpatrick, Imke van Bentum

First of all, let me say how much I appreciate both your interest and your wanting to take things further than was possible in class at the time. Your questions have made me think. Thank you!

**What motivated you to choose both archaeology and anthropology at the start of your academic career? And why did you decide to become an anthropologist rather than an archaeologist?**

As a schoolgirl in southern England I had the opportunity of digging with a local historical society, which I hugely enjoyed (Roman remains seemed to be everywhere). At the same time, I knew I didn't want to 'be' an archaeologist. We had touched on Rousseau during history lessons on the eighteenth century, and my head was swirling with grand ideas about understanding society. Cambridge University offered a degree course in 'Archaeology and Anthropology' and this seemed like a dream combination. Because of the way the course was structured, the first year included archaeology along with the two anthropologies -- biological (as it was then called) and social; in years 2 and 3 I specialized in social anthropology alone.

As to social anthropology, on the one hand, I had aspirations to get a grip on the notion of society that people seemed to be using in so many senses; on the other hand, once I actually embarked on reading in the subject I then discovered the world of ethnography, and its sudden enlargement of detail by comparison with what I was digging up – tile fragments, potsherds (happy enough as I had been with them) – bowled me over. This was

something else. Radcliffe Brown lured me on the first count; Evans-Pritchard – Nuer cattle bells – on the second.

**In comparison to 1987, when you wrote your article ‘An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology’ [Signs, vol. 12, no. 2], feminism has changed quite a bit (it also now tackles topics such as non-binary gender identity, sexuality, and the interplay of race and gender). Considering these developments, how would you re-read your article from a contemporary perspective? And how would you interpret the relationship between today’s feminism(s) and ‘the Other’?**

What an intriguing question! It is good to see you historicizing this piece of writing, since it is all too easy to forget that we write in relation to the issues and problems of the day, whether consciously or not. That article certainly belonged to a specific moment in time when gender relations were being uncovered for discipline after discipline. In the light of what has happened since, one of the issues to be re-assessed is what I then took to be part of the power of feminist thought, that it itself did not behave as a ‘discipline’ (which is why it could affect so many). But that is obviously challenged by all the gender studies centres that subsequently sprang up and the dedicated courses that it became possible to pursue.

Such a re-assessment might also point directly to the way feminist thought crossed subject boundaries. Consider the directions that some individual feminist anthropologists took in the turn to technology (including reproductive technologies) of the 1990s, and the more general opening up of interdisciplinary expectations that made it unremarkable for writers such as Donna Haraway to be read by anthropologists. At the same time, as you observe, the field of feminist scholarship was feeding into and drawing from the broad project of critical studies, stimulated especially by Judith Butler, from which anthropologists writing on feminist matters gained fresh momentum. Not only was gender loosened from its binarisms, it was possible to trouble scholarly practices, for instance by queering – or acknowledging the queerness of - diverse formulations of what knowledge is or does. Meanwhile anthropology’s comparative project (‘cross cultural comparison’), which had

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initially provided the study of gender relations so many materials to think with, faded from its former prominence. In brief, if there always was a question mark hanging over the idea of 'a relationship' between feminism and anthropology, nowadays one would need to re-assess the very notion of a relation, at least insofar as there is no compunction to hold steady either 'feminism' or 'anthropology'. Or, to put it otherwise, an initial question might address the circumstances under which each exists as an object of thought (or practice or method or in whatever mode) of the kind that could be pressed into comparison.

Thank you for picking me up on referring to feminism's 'Other'. That was a bit too slick on my part (too easily borrowed from some feminist parlance of the time), but was a way of expressing what I felt were certain political-intellectual stances. It would take a detailed, ethnographic study of today's many feminisms to think through its present day analogy.

**In your 1996 article 'Cutting the Network' [Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, vol. 2, no. 3], you mention the scientists who, based on twelve years of team research, created a test for Hepatitis C. When applying for a patent, they conceded that they did not do all the work themselves, having made use of the research that came before; however, since their work presented the defining part of the research, they felt justified in being named as the patent owners. Would you say that the concept of 'cutting the network' can be used in connection with a critical intersectional perspective? For example, could we use it to research who gets credited on a scientific research project that involves dozens or hundreds of scientists, and who gets 'cut out'?**

Yes, you are quite right apropos the legal framework of industrial patents, which produces particular kinds of owners to the exclusion of others. In fact your comment anticipates work on scientific and other kinds of authorship that was taking off at the time (questions were being asked about the ownership of academic knowledge and what it meant to be an author). Apropos science research, in particular, this was in the larger context of how

authorial citations build the prestige structures that sustain scientific reputations, with attendant queries on the diverse implications of putting research into the public domain.

Thus people were experimenting with new ways of conceiving a public 'commons' in intellectual property. Meanwhile, this all remains a living issue for scientific journals – I gather that the record for numbers of authors cited for single article at present stands at over 5,000.

However, your questions cast the issue afresh – put it under a different spotlight – by bringing in a critical intersectional perspective. In other words, you are pointing to already existing identities and interests and asking about mechanisms that would include or exclude a name on categorical or personal grounds. This issue is not restricted to research in the natural sciences (which is how English-speakers ordinarily understand 'science'). 'Cutting the network' could indeed encourage enquiry into the kinds of truncations that anthropologists so often have to exercise: for example, whom anthropologists mention in their acknowledgements (interlocutors, helpers, family, colleagues?), or the way in which they dwell on quotations from this interlocutor but not that (knowledge, neighbourhood, expertise, gender?). We cannot avoid such 'cutting' – it would be impossible to say or do anything otherwise. But the image of a network does serve as reminder of how long strings interdependencies can get, so that the notion of cutting a network might lead us to ponder on everything that has gone into a particular selection.

**How else can we think about maintaining responsibility and accountability – a major issue in many European academic corners, including in Germany – without falling into the restrictive trap of 'audit culture'?**

You have posed a conundrum here that I would love to know how to answer.

Part of the impasse that university academics perceive relates to the previous topic: changing conventions of reward and accountability in scholarship. Another part springs

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from the de-professionalization of the academy: what happens when people's efforts cannot be taken on trust (which may or may not be a good thing). And it is all given a new twist by current conventions in which bodies of many kinds are anxious to seek approval from their members, users, consumers, purchasers or whatever (every time you are asked to 'like' something). One might think about what is lost from or gained for the concept of accountability by this ubiquitous search for a positive tick.

Perhaps one way of thinking through some of the issues might be to start with student evaluations of teaching or university experience, and I keep it as my example. Can one do better than simply imagine forms of instant feedback? Is one still interested in assessing 'performance' – and if not, how do junior staff demonstrate their value? (Should evaluations determine career prospects?) What kinds of schemes might be devised that did not add to the pressures of (everyone's) work? How long after a course is given is it appropriate to register its effectiveness? -- Or would it be better to scrap such evaluations altogether? If so, from whose point of view, and how many actors would need persuading: university authorities, funding formula for universities (public or private money), staff-student ratios on specific courses, and so on?

Alternatively, would there be a way of undertaking scrutiny that did not make scrutiny an inevitably administrative task? Two thoughts come to mind. First, in respect of measuring output, however that is understood: by what mechanisms can the teaching-learning process be turned into one of mutual benefit, interest, curiosity, inspiration? Or does mutuality inhibit overt judgment? There are pros as well as cons to impersonal (e.g. anonymous) structures in examinations. Second, in respect of accountability: one might wish to bring ethics (beyond institutional ethics such as research review boards) into the picture. Discussions in anthropology at the time when 'audit cultures' emerged as an object of enquiry also raised the question of self-accountability, and among other things the self may value its disciplinary – or cross disciplinary – identity. Would it help if a larger role were accorded disciplines or subject areas? The idea would be not to conjure up new national overseers but to recognize within the local institution (the university) the heterogeneity of scholarly practices as it impinges on a student's experience.

**If you were to embark upon a new research project today, would you prefer to revisit a project from the past or would you choose a new topic? Do you already have a new topic in mind?**

Over the period since retirement (13 years now), I have taken on two new projects (more or less in parallel), though both stem from and go back to work done earlier. One was to consolidate thinking about the concept of 'relations' by delving into certain historical as well as contemporary aspects of English and European thought. The exercise turned out to be quite illuminating, at least for myself. The other followed a last, short visit to Mt Hagen in the Papua New Guinea Highlands (in 2015), when I was struck anew by certain properties of their subsistence crops laid bare by climate-exacerbated drought. That has led me to re-think and want to re-describe all kinds of issues from the ethnography of Melanesia: gender relations, kinship, regeneration, life and death, cosmology.

Perhaps I can answer your question more concretely by pointing to an opportunity to devise a new project that actually came my way; this took place over 2019-22. I called it 'Time and the ethnographic horizon at moments of crisis'. It focused on Amazonia as well as Melanesia: retirement had given me the possibility of catching up with certain Amazonianist colleagues, and of thinking a bit about some of the fascinating work that has Amerindian roots. The topic itself related materials from areas of long standing anthropological interest (concepts of time) to some of the kinds of 'crises' by which we mark the present epoch.

**What would be your advice for students of cultural anthropology in Europe today?**

You are in a subject, if I may say so, that at once draws its thinking from societies and cultures worldwide and respects the thoughts and theories of people that lie beyond its own imaginative horizons. At present I happen to be reading two books by cultural anthropologists, on work undertaken in Ecuador and in Indonesian Papua respectively. The

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former deals with what was involved in trying to sue an oil company for environmental contamination, the latter with the ramifications of palm oil plantations for social life in its largest sense. Not on climate change directly, [though] both books address some of the drivers of it. And in the course of cultural analysis, the latter in particular provides brilliant insight not just into people's livelihoods but also into their narratives (their own analyses), which confront some of the assumptions we might bring to such situations.

Neither of these anthropologists lives in Europe, though either could have (they write from the US and Australia), yet their endeavours are not so far away from those of us Europeans. Their ideas and approaches are part of our mental hinterland, as are the ideas and approaches of their interlocuters. Of course your research may be in Europe itself, and it will require as much local knowledge of whatever it is you study as any study does, wherever undertaken, but the resources for thinking through the problems (as in problematics) you encounter is another matter. Such resources may be found anywhere. We don't just live in a connected-up world, our discipline gives us tools to see it with. Look out for intellectual companions and allies – they could come from unexpected places.

But your questions suggest that you already know this! All the best with your studies.

Marilyn Strathern