

Nigel Thrift's interview with Paul Rabinow for D834 – December 2002

NT: What I thought we might do today is to talk about a whole series of issues that come from your career but are also very general, that involve ethical stances to fieldwork specifically, but to the world in general as well. I thought perhaps the best way of doing that was by reaching back first of all to your field experience in the late sixties, in Morocco, that you then wrote up subsequently as *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. What I was particularly interested in was if you can re-capture the time and whether you were really aware in the same way as you might be now of the kind of ethical issues that were involved in fieldwork?

PR: Okay, let me say one or two preliminary things that I think are helpful in framing how I got to be an anthropologist. First, I went to the University of Chicago during the 1960s, and the main influence on my intellectual career and life was a man named Richard McKeon, who was a historian of philosophy. McKeon was an extremely scholarly character, who did the basic edition of Aristotle in English and seemed to know everything. He was the most learned man I've ever met in my life and I've met most of the major figures in the last fifty years. McKeon was awesome. We learned a version of the tradition of philosophy as pragmatism. I had a kind of heavily Aristotle-based pragmatism from McKeon that shaped the way I did things and that continues to do so. One principle was that philosophy was about the world. His point was that philosophy was a practice of inquiry; the point of philosophy was not to arrive at self-contained, internally consistent, arguments, in either the style of analytic philosophy or scholastic philosophy, but to use the categories, the questions and problems of philosophy, as a mode of inquiry. And this was in some sense, a very American, pragmatic thing to do. And hence there was never any contradiction for me in using philosophy to further anthropological inquiry. Another reason I went into anthropology was I didn't want to spend my life in the university: first, as I've come to appreciate even more over the years, there are many things I don't like about the university, but, it was also there was an

existential dimension to this; being an anthropologist meant putting yourself at risk in one way or another and exploring something very different that was outside of you. Further, I guess I didn't particularly like the United States, and doing anthropology was a manner of leaving both the United States and the university with some regularity. This choice was a real turning point as many of my friends became very political during these years; Chicago was one of the centres of the SDS and a lot of very radical activity went on there. I decided to leave America and to go into the (post)colonial world. The Vietnam War had a French colonial context that Americans knew very little about, and furthermore were uninterested in. So part of my politics and ethics of knowledge has this background that it seemed to me part of the anti-war movement in the United States to learn more about Vietnam and about French colonialism. The other part of this dimension of things that is important to underline, is the impact of Claude Lévi Strauss. I had studied in Paris, in 1965/66 and went to Lévi Strauss's seminars. In *Tristes Tropiques* he talks about the experiential dimension of being an anthropologist and of also being alienated from the Western World, so the Moroccan experience for me was, as it were, prepared and saturated by philosophical political, ethical considerations by the time I got there. And then the question became, in an important way, how to make this part of both the research and the writing about Morocco. It seemed to me nonetheless the idea was not to keep these spheres totally separate but was to find a way of bringing them into a relationship, to invent new ways of thinking and new ways of practicing anthropology, and then ultimately new ways of writing. And so, it's really worth noting that *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, today an uncontroversial book, was turned down by six presses – Clifford Geertz, my advisor, told me it would ruin my career. And in a short period of time, it's become a text that's been used in many places as part of an introduction to anthropology, so a lot has happened to the discipline in this period of time. I was in the Middle Atlas Mountains, cold, and lonely, and, feeling quite sorry for myself, and, lacking most known comforts, so one of the things that I did was read, and, although almost no one's ever noticed, the structure of *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, is taken directly from Hegel, and follows the chapters of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, except of

course, it doesn't have a conclusion. In Hegel – in Hegel's *Phenomenology* about which I had learned a great deal in Paris from the course of Jean Hyppolite – there's a dialectic movement through conflictual situations to a form of resolution at a higher plane; I stopped before the resolution. Another important philosophical element is that of friendship, *philia*, in Aristotle's *Ethics*. This site of virtue and justice seems to me one of the main components. issues and topics of research and one of its joys. That is to say among rare colleagues and more frequently among students, and in a different and complex way, with the people one is studying, some form of mutual trust, respect and common project seems to me an important part of the enterprise. So there is a fairly explicit philosophic background to the book, although I was at great pains to say nothing about almost any of that in the book itself because I knew that would prevent people from reading it. So people read it as a very personal book, but of course, I don't think it's very personal at all, but I've never convinced anybody of that!

NT: (Laughs) There's lots of things I'd like to ask you about that, but I think we'd better stick to a kind of format.

What I wanted to then ask was, given that it's quite difficult to re-capture those times and given that, as you say, the book has become almost in itself a kind of rite of passage that students read, what kind of criticisms of the book were made at the time, first of all in the US, but then also in France when it was re-published some years later on – in 1988, I think?

PR: Yes, well the criticisms in America in the early days were very simplistic ones; people were basically outraged that I had violated this boundary between the personal and the scientific. There had been many books by anthropologists about fieldwork experience, including Lévi Strauss, but the one absolute line that needed to be respected was the one between what was subjective and what was objective. And, so the reaction amounted to one of boundary maintenance as much as anything else. It was a genre issue. Later on, well, later on in the United States two sorts of criticisms – of course I shouldn't give you any ammunition! – but, two sorts of criticisms more recently have come up. One that the book was claiming much more knowledge than it actually had and that in fact, to speak

about Islam one needed, either to be Islamic – a claim that I completely reject -- or one needed many more years of study in order to have achieved anything like a sufficient knowledge. I think there is something to that, but that demand would also make anthropology essentially impossible, some people think that is a good idea, I don't. And then, of course, there's a current of criticism that basically makes me directly responsible for all the sexual domination that exists in Morocco. Somehow that cold and lonely young man who visited a prostitute once, is responsible for the entire structure of gender relations in Morocco. Obviously I think that's utter nonsense, but that sort of stuff circulates these days in the academy; it is good for a chuckle.

The reception also has been sort of interesting in France. The response I've gotten has been pretty uniformly positive, with the only exception that the French anthropological community has coded everything American after 1986 that's experimental in any way, as post-modern (laughs), and that's a way of dismissing it and keeping it far away, and since I'm resolutely modern and not post-modern, I resist that. Although there is a certain humour in this as well. But otherwise, many people informally in France, have told me they enjoyed the book, so I think it's less controversial here in France. And then finally in Morocco, I think, it's had a pretty good reception. I have not seen much in print, but numbers of younger Moroccan scholars have told me they've liked it. And then England – you tell me.

NT: What I thought we might do next was to talk just a bit about Foucault. One of the reasons for doing that, I think, is in a sense it seems to me this kind of ethic, that you were pulling out really from these early days of a kind of philosophical education (yeah), come practical education (exactly), is pulled through into your interest in Foucault, I take it. And I was particularly interested in why it was that in a sense for a time, you became one of the key expositors of his ideas, in the rest of the world.

PR: When I came back from Morocco I decided that I didn't want to continue to work in Morocco, mainly because I didn't want to spend the core of my professional life involved with questions around Islam and, I decided I was going to work in Vietnam. So I studied Vietnamese for two years and I made the incredibly stupid mistake of trusting

Henry Kissinger when he said that with the Peace Treaty there would be exchange between Vietnam and the US. The idea of working in Vietnam, became impossible for an American. There were French scholars who had worked in Vietnam but it was impossible for an American. One of the things that struck me very strongly when I arrived in Morocco (and I had read everything basically that there was in English and French, about Morocco), in Rabat, here was an art deco city. It's an extremely beautiful city, as was Casablanca in a different way, and I was amazed that no one had ever talked about this. So to make a long story short, I transformed the idea of doing fieldwork in Vietnam into a kind of historical book about planning cities and planning societies in the French world, linking Morocco and Vietnam as two poles of the enterprise, because it turned out that a group of French architects who built the first modern French cities, that were not built in France, but were built in Morocco, also worked in Vietnam. The result is the book *French Modern*. While I was in the middle of organizing this project, Michel Foucault arrived in Berkeley, and I had a relationship with Hubert Dreyfus who was, a kind of professor, for me, and taught me a lot about Heidegger and about German philosophy. Dreyfus and John Searle were giving, a seminar in which they talked about Foucault, and while at the time I didn't care about Foucault at all, I just thought what they said was wrong, and Dreyfus and I began a discussion. It just so happened that while we were having this discussion, someone told us Foucault was coming to Stanford, which is next to Berkeley, and so I said, well, I'm a New Yorker, I'll call him up. And so I called him up, and said, would you talk to us, and he agreed, we gave him a ride to Stanford, and we talked for eight hours that day, tape recording things, and that was the beginning of a truly extraordinarily wonderful and fortunate period of a few years – five years, with Foucault. And so, Foucault enjoyed talking to Dreyfus and myself, because we were not disciples of his. Dreyfus was one million per cent Heideggerian and still is, and I was an anthropologist, so I was interested in various philosophic and other issues, and I was doing other things. So Foucault felt he had some interlocutors at that point. But as Dreyfus and I began to work with Foucault, I increasingly found that his concepts helped me to organize my work on the planning of French cities so I continued that work during

the time of getting to know Foucault. And then Foucault was very interested in working together and so basically he and Dreyfus and I did a lot of methodological work that was very enriching to us and seemed to be profitable to Foucault. In the course of that work we decided to write a book together that Foucault participated in and then tragically, he died shortly thereafter from AIDS. Suddenly Dreyfus and I became the Foucault specialists, that we had not set out to become, and here, twenty years later, I'm still sort of living with Michel Foucault ...

NT: You'll never get away from it (laughs).

PR: Right – which I'm grateful for, but the other thing I'd say is that I seem to have a propensity for labels to be put on me, so for some people I'm still *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, for other people I'm Foucault, for other people I'm biotechnology, etc. I think there are connections between these things, but so be it. In any case, it was a great, great honour and privilege to work with Foucault. This was the moment when he was himself struggling to find a way of thinking about ethics; perhaps if we had met five years earlier, I don't think this would've happened. Foucault was putting his work into question and particularly in relation to a life of thinking, a philosophical life on the one hand and life in general on the other hand. It has been said that Foucault liked California because in San Francisco there was the great period of creative gay life and in Berkeley there were good libraries and people to talk to.

NT: I understand that. You can see in Foucault's later work, the way in which he's struggling towards marshalling a whole series of things in order to produce his own take on ethics in one way or the other. When you came to actually editing his essential works, and especially in the volume on ethics, what did you actually think that really had crystallized out into, specifically when one thinks about if you like, the relationship you were also talking about in terms of life and valuing life in all sorts of different ways?

PR: I think that the great surprising lack in twentieth century philosophy and in twentieth century thought is: what is a philosophic life? Why think? When you begin to reflect on it, almost all of the answers, and this is overwhelmingly true in the United States, are instrumental. One becomes an anthropologist, or a philosopher or a cultural

critic, or whatever it is, for political reasons – we could talk at some length about how political this academic politics really is ...

NT: I'm sure.

PR: Obviously I'm sceptical about a lot of it, but the idea that a life of thinking per se, that is not a life of contemplation, but in the sense of Aristotle, Dewey, McKeon and Foucault as well as in the work of my other great hero, Max Weber. Weber's "Science as a vocation," "*Wissenschaft als Beruf*," is unsurpassed. Remember that *Wissenschaft* doesn't mean just the natural sciences. It means all thought. Foucault was struggling with how to live a life that was not so much moral, because he wasn't interested in morality, as ethical. By ethics he meant the practices that constituted a mode of subjectivation that one could endure oneself. And therefore, this idea of ethics as really quite separate from morality, and as furthermore a practice that had to pass through questions of inquiry and truth, seemed to me to have been untouched in many ways since Weber. Wittgenstein's life also can be interpreted in this frame, but he approached it in such a different way. It seems less directly relevant for someone who was committed to inquiry. And Foucault seemed, after Weber, to be the person who was really struggling with why think questions that had political dimensions. So this is where the anthropological dimension came back, something was at stake, and what was at stake was that you might actually change the way you lived if what you were thinking about brought you to a different place. That is what interests me about Foucault. I had this immense privilege of watching him struggle with these issues, something that I am very grateful for.

NT: One could say that in a way, the rise of life sciences and of biosciences generally has now put those questions on the practical agenda, in such a way that they can no longer be avoided. (Right). And one of the things I was interested in was the way in that you had been able to take these Foucaultian things and marry them with your own things of one form or another, to produce a take on the life sciences that kept this ethical component, but also realizes the degree to which the life sciences themselves had an ethical component ingrained in them (right). I wondered if you could just talk a little about that.

PR: Yes. One of the main lessons of Foucault, that is also a Nietzschean lesson, is, that every time you are confronted by the universal category, you need to approach it as historical and contingent and to see it as a practice. So in my book *French Modern*, the category that I was interested in was “society.” We all think, especially in France, but elsewhere as well, that “society” is something that all human beings have. This is clearly not true; “society” is a form of self-understanding that moderns have constructed for themselves. So I wrote *French Modern* to explore one trajectory of the modern construction of this universal category society, how it emerged as a product of operations of power and knowledge; how society was constructed in such a way that it was understood as an object that needed to be reformed. That is what made it modern. The next category that I took up, being pushed to do so by some students of Georges Canguilhem in France, was “life.” People think that of course, life is a universal. Except life is not a universal; life is a category that’s historical, contingent, mediated by scientific practice, situated in the institution of various institutions of power, and a space in which technologies of subjectivation, took place. So the challenge of dealing with the current life sciences, was precisely the diagnostic position that we are in, a moment in which life is becoming a modern category. And it’s the same with the mapping of the genome, and with the ability to manipulate and change DNA, we are in a moment in which life is becoming that kind of object that is known -- being known means that it will be reformed, and so this seemed like an excellent sort of nominalist anthropological project, one that suited my temperament. And then of course, California, was the place in the world where this was going on, so, that came together very well. And just one other quick remark, sitting here in Paris, for the last two days, I’ve been at two different conferences on Foucault and Biopower, and after, essentially after 1976/77, Foucault, who invented the term, never said anything else about it, because he died. He worked on other things and then he died, so, the investigations and reflections on bio-power, are something that the rest of us have to take up, because Foucault didn’t actually give us very much help on it.

NT: One of the things that’s interesting, having said all these kind of things, is that there’s a kind of ethics of life sciences, but there’s also a very definite politics that flows

from that, and you've been involved in that in various ways, especially in Iceland, I think, and, I wondered about the way in which, one was able, to, if you like, see the future, in terms of these kinds of things, and the way in which, if you like, populations might actually begin to be seen in different ways from perhaps the way that Foucault envisaged they might be.

PR: Yes, I'm a modern, and in my own way, I am committed to a form of enlightenment, and, one of the things that's more striking in the United States, although I think this is true in the UK as well, is that there's an extravagant amount of fear of science and technology, particularly in the life sciences. One of the other reasons that I got involved in this work was political. One of the professors at Berkeley was teaching what was taken to be a racist and homophobic course to a thousand undergraduates, and some of the students revolted against this and several of my colleagues ferociously attacked him for being a racist and a homophobe, of course he didn't respond. This didn't change his mind at all, so it seemed to me that another line of approach to this was to know enough science to ask him exactly where, on which chromosome, the gay gene happened to be found? Since he couldn't answer that question, because there isn't any gay gene, he certainly didn't know where it was; this was a different kind of criticism. And so, I'm interested in developing a form of criticism that is simultaneously not denunciation, because I think in terms of virtue ethics, one doesn't want to become a Nietzschean person of resentment, and one wants to pass through knowledge as a form of critique and as an instrument of critique. And so, that's the general project. So when I went to Iceland, many people knew, before anything had happened, that this was (a.) bad, (b.) exploitative, (c.) eugenic, etc, etc, etc. And there was this whole literature about the Data Base Project. I was actually in Iceland several weeks before I realized that this famous database that Hilary Rose and many other people were ferociously against, didn't even actually exist, it was a project whose details were open for discussion, and so on. This is a complicated issue, but the main point goes back to Dewey and McKeon, and practice of philosophy that is to be close to the practices that are shaping who we are today and, if you know already what those practices are in certain domains like genomics,

then I think you're not doing inquiry. There's no room in your discourse for discovery because you know already. And so my line of approach was to suspend judgement, and to go to Iceland, and to work with an Icelandic anthropologist Gisli Palsson, and to find out what was going on before I already had my, you know, prêt-a-porter ethical judgements about what it was. And I'd say, one small thing about that. The main opposition to the Decode genetics programme in Iceland is from the doctors. Now one might agree with them, but one shouldn't forget that one of the things the Decode is doing is stripping a paternalistic medical establishment of its power, so they never cared about informed consent to a privacy before – anybody could see anybody's records, it's a teeny little society – everyone knew whose uncle was schizophrenic and who had broken their leg – but suddenly this world issue of ethics came to Iceland and a rather retrograde establishment then become an avant garde of ethics, and so I think we need a slightly more complicated discussion of that, but I'll say here, what I say to all the journalists who call me (who'll tell me at the end of what I say that that is very interesting but won't quote any of it because it's not a sound bite) that what I'm urging us to do is to get close to what is happening, and think about it, that doesn't mean, don't be political, don't be ethical, but it does mean know what you're talking about, and to suffer from the intellectual disease of complexity.

NT: Maybe that brings us rather easily on to Institutional Review Boards in the US, and the rise and rise of those institutions. I suppose one can see that rise in two ways, certainly, there's a general bioethics industry, that as you say, in many ways, seems to be the establishment finding new things to do, but there's also in a sense, something going on in our own backyard in universities, in that Research Committees, or whatever you want to call them, Ethics Committees and so on, are now laying down the law, about what actually is an ethical stance on a whole series of issues in the social sciences and increasingly indeed in the humanities – I see they are particularly active in history – and, what I wondered was whether you thought, and how far you thought, a professionalization of ethics was defensible?

PR: Okay, I have two main things to say about this. First, Foucault, in 1966, in *Les Mots et les choses* said in this famous phrase, that, perhaps the figure of Man was coming to an end. That was probably wrong. The way I'm thinking about these things now is in terms of Anthropos, because after all I'm an Anthropologist. Maybe Man was one figure of anthropos and maybe there will be others. One of the characteristics of a possible new figure of Anthropos is that this figuration is becoming global. There are three vectors of globalisation that go back to Foucault's definition of man in *The Order of Things*, it's very nice in English. Life, labour, language. It's clear that capitalism is global, at this point, no one contests that. It's clear that molecular biology and the life sciences more broadly, are global and there's really not much contestation about that either. But then there's the third variable, that Foucault called language. I think humanitarianism is the third vector of globalization in this new figure of Anthropos; we find Tony Blair as the intelligent version of the illiterate and unspeakably, ineloquent George Bush, articulating in a number of places, first around Serbia, but more recently [2002] again around Iraq, a problematic of a right in the name of humanity, to intervene in situations in which the rights of human subjects are being violated. So I think this is a new figure of Anthropos that is at a global scale, and then of course, it has to be linked to micropractices for this to become part of a political institutional structure, and this is where we come to Institutional Review Boards. This is a long story, but the short version of it is, that's what's going on, on the one hand, and then of course what else could these be but procedural ethics because, like in the European Union, much of what you have in common is an empty proceduralism. That's not always bad – if you need to make sure that the size of pickle jars is the same in all countries, there's something to be said for common standards. But whether ethics should operate this way is a question that certainly from Kant and Hegel forward has been debated. Kant proposed a rather abstract procedural ethics and Hegel, fought it in the name of actual concrete practices of human beings living in groups. So I think this is a tension of modernity that we're still living in and living with. So when I filled out for the first time my Human Subjects Form at the University of California, I happened to be teaching Kant's essay on *Perpetual Peace* as

well as his essay on, *What is Enlightenment?*, so when they asked me how my research would benefit humanity, I, probably for the first time, quoted the long section from Kant, in which, he said that enlightenment consists, in the public use of reason, and that even in the face of benevolent and tolerant authorities, it was our obligation as rational beings to use our reason by ourselves, and to achieve the right use of reason in the practice of a search for a kind of dignity or autonomy, and that eventually benevolent authorities would have to give way to this practice. So I see us now caught in a rather impressive bureaucratic vice, that will not be terribly easy to get out of, but that I think is one of the major things that we as philosophically-oriented human scientists need to think about, and that means thinking, but it also means finding ways of practicing inquiry that challenge, without denunciation, this form of bureaucratic rationality we are now confronted with. Because surely we're all in favour of the rights of man, or the rights of humanity, but what does that mean? That is the question, and it comes to mean something only when it's embedded in practice, and that's the issue that we need to struggle with and if we don't struggle with it we're in trouble.

NT: What would you say – this is a practical question really – to postgraduate students who were told, you fill out this form and we tell you you cannot do these kind of things, what would you think would be the avenues open to them in any serious sense, or do you think this is a thing that senior scholars can complain about, but that junior scholars would find very problematic.

PR: Many of my colleagues, tell me that the best answer is of course, just to lie, because that's after all what these Boards want. The Boards want a kind of formulaic prose and this prose after a while is very easy to produce; if their demands are fairly empty then you're going to give a fairly empty response.

NT: So this is an EU syndrome?

PR: Yes. It seems to me unethical, and, I refuse to do that, so what I did instead, and will do again if I must, is to give them back philosophy and anthropology. One of the other questions was, “how will you treat racial difference?” and the answer to that was: as an anthropologist this was a non-scientific question that had been, overcome and gotten

rid of in the series of UNESCO statements on race in the early 1950s and that the very posing of the question seemed to me a racist insult, since in contemporary biology, as well as in human sciences it wasn't a category. Racism might be a category, but race was not and therefore, I think the senior scholars must take the lead because we're protected, in finding internal ways of contesting and making more complicated these issues. I know in the United States, the American Anthropology Association and others, are in fact, exerting a good deal of pressure on the National Science Foundation, with some success, to show the absurdity of answering the same question if you're doing a kidney transplant, and you're investigating, as I am, some of the most powerful executives of capitalist companies. So I think we need to explore this terrain, since its part of the new figure of Anthropos, but I think we should answer in more detail than they want, as part of the answer.

NT: (Laughs). This is a bore-them-to-death-syndrome ... (laughs).

PR: And confuse them. They want three sentences, so give them twenty pages.

NT: Yeah, and make sure it's a paper you can still put out at some point or the other.

Okay, I tried to think of a way, of pulling this together, and I was re-reading a couple of your things on the way here on the train, just to refresh my memory, and one of the things that came up, and that I thought might make an end point was that at various points I noticed some of the things you were talking about involved dignity, and, in particular, the dignity of the subject in a sense being part of how the subject is formed. And, what I was wondering is, if one could look at your career, and look at all these things that you've done, whether one could find a kind of motif in terms of that. One of the reasons for that is because it struck me, in reading a lot of your work, the degree to that you have been trying in certain senses, to attack a term that is elusive, but that still seems, I think, one that most people would think was very important.

PR: Dignity is a very strange term. It was discussed in it's contemporary sense by Kant, in the *Fundamental Principles of Metaphysics and Morals*, and not since. There's not a single major philosophical book since Kant that discusses dignity; yet in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dignity is taken as a term that is self-evident.

However, Kant says very explicitly that dignity is a term that applies only to rational beings, not only to man qua rational being, but to angels and other extra-terrestrials on other planets who may exercise reason. Hence of all the possible philosophic terms in the history of western philosophy, this seems one of the least appropriate to found a bioethics, because bioethics after all treats either foetuses, or end of life people in comas and in conditions in which their reason is if not entirely absent, largely absent. Yet the term is everywhere, and everyone bows and scrapes and says yes, dignity is what we all want. It's also previously been a term applied to kings and to Jesus as a hierarchical term. It seems to me that we need, and this is a general theme, a rather different ethical vocabulary that's more contemporary than the one that's currently available. If there's something that continues to drive me in doing the work I'm doing, and particularly in the United States, that is after all such a ferociously anti-intellectual country, it is the right to think, but to think in the context of virtue and of self-formation and something like justice. This is the project, and it seems to me, that it's a project that's under attack from many sides; it's under attack from bureaucracies, it's under attack from an over-politicalization of certain aspects of university life, it's under attack by censors and moralists – the United States is full of these in this new government. Surprisingly enough, if you look in the twentieth century, for clear defences of the right to think, there are actually very few of them; Weber's *Science as a Vocation* is outstanding, and there is also Foucault and Hans Blumenberg. This is what drives me, thinking not as contemplation, but as practice, and practice that is self-formative, and worldly.

NT: Well, thank you very much, it's been a privilege. Let's stop there.