In a series of recent interventions, Tim Ingold (2008; 2011: 229–43; 2014; 2017a) argues against using the term “ethnographic” for our encounters with people and for the fieldwork in which these encounters take place. To him, such encounters are not intrinsically ethnographic: rather, he holds that this is a judgment that is cast upon them through retrospective conversion of the learning, remembering and note-taking which they call forth into pretexts for something else altogether. This ulterior purpose, concealed from the people whom you covertly register as informants, is documentary. It is this that turns your experience, your memory and your notes into material—sometimes spun quasi-scientifically as “data”—upon which you subsequently hope to draw in the project of offering an account. (Ingold 2014: 386)

Nevertheless, I think it is necessary to understand our encounters with people in the field as ethnographic, because they are of a special kind. To give a preliminary answer to Ingold’s question about what could possibly distinguish an encounter that is ethnographic from one that is not (Ingold 2014: 386), it is my contention that our knowledge interests and institutional, ethical, and professional commitments as anthropologists structure encounters with our interlocutors not only during fieldwork, but also do so even beforehand. It makes a big differ-
ence whether somebody engages in participant observation in order to do anthropology (engaging in ethnographic fieldwork) or whether one does participant observation as an activist, or even as a guerrilla who seeks to “learn from the people” from a Maoist perspective (Shah 2017), as an advertiser seeking access to markets, as a spy, a missionary, a writer or long-term tourist, or a journalist. This distinction is the major difference between ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation that serves other ends. For all its sophistication, Ingold’s intervention does not allow for this crucial and necessary differentiation. An ethnographic encounter is a particular “frame” in a Batesonian and Goffmanian sense (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974), a certain definition of what kind of situation and action this is supposed to be.

For this reason, as anthropologists conducting fieldwork, our practical goals are also bound to be different from the practical goals many of our respondents pursue as we encounter them—and the same also often applies to our ideological commitments and those that inform the actions of our respondents. Ingold suggests that it is common for anthropologists to conceal such interests and commitments and to pursue the actual purposes of our research covertly (Ingold 2014: 386). He draws an image of ethnographic fieldwork as the mere recording and description of single cases that are then fed into a posterior comparative endeavor called anthropology. This to me seems a distortion of what anthropologists do. It is against the ethical standards of anthropology to engage in undercover and undeclared research, concealing from one’s interlocutors that the anthropologist will work what she learns in her encounters with interlocutors into written scholarly texts, within ethical limits. Some anthropologists have indeed violated these standards by secretly conducting intelligence work alongside their ethnographic pursuits, using the latter as a cover for the former (Price 2016). It has, however been much less common for anthropologists to conceal their roles as ethnographers and to make their interlocutors believe that they are actually long-term tourists, activists, marketing researchers, fiction writers, or guerrillas, or are there in some other role, disavowing their profession as ethnographers with academic knowledge interests. Those anthropologists who have violated the ethical standards of the discipline have rarely kept secret their roles as ethnographers, but remained silent about their other problematic, nonethnographic pursuits, instead of the other way around. As an anthropologist, my understanding of properly conducted fieldwork is that it involves being clear and open about one’s academic knowledge interests as they can easily go into
Commitment, Correspondence, and Fieldwork

different directions from those concerns and commitments that inform our respondents’ actions in our encounters with them. Such academic knowledge interests are of course also very different from our own concerns and everyday commitments as anthropologists when we are not engaged in ethnographic research.

Even though the relationships between anthropologists and their interlocutors that emerge from such divergences of interests and commitments are often highly complex, Ingold argues that we need to strive for a kind of processual nonseparation from our respondents and their activities. This is what he points to when he stresses the necessity of an “ontological commitment” (Ingold 2014: 387) and the quasi-musical “correspondence” between the participant observer and the people with whom she works.

Launched in the current of real time, participant observation couples the forward movement of one’s own perception and action with the movements of others, much as melodic lines are coupled in musical counterpoint. For this coupling of movements that, as they proceed, continually answer to one another, I have adopted the term correspondence (Ingold 2013: 105–8). By this I do not mean the endeavor to come up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the happenings going on around us. It has nothing to do with representation or description. It is rather about answering to these happenings with interventions, questions and responses of our own—or in other words, about living attentionally with others. Participant observation is a practice of correspondence in this sense. (Ingold 2014: 389—emphasis in original)

For Ingold, anthropologists and their interlocutors are also part of the same “meshwork”:

Like the voices of choral music, whose harmony lies in their alternating tension and resolution, the entwined lines of the meshwork join with one another, and in so doing, possess an inner feel for each other and are not simply linked by external contiguity. I shall adopt the term sympathy to refer to this feel. As the design theorist Lars Spuybroek explains, sympathy is a “living with” rather than a “looking at,” a form of feeling-knowing that operates in the interstices of things. It is, Spuybroek writes, “what things feel when they shape each other” (Spuybroek 2016: xvii). (Ingold 2017b: 12)

As the cited passages indicate, Ingold suggests that achieving such correspondence and searching for the kind of holistic truth anthropology strives for are closely connected. This, to me, seems problematic for two reasons. First, Ingoldian correspondence and ontological commitment do not sufficiently distinguish between ethnographic fieldwork in the tradition of anthropology and the multiple other kinds
of participant observation oriented to different, even opposed, ends, thereby glossing over their decisive differences. Second, it downplays the potential and even sometimes necessary differences in interests and goals between ethnographers and their respondents. Describing field research, as Ingold does, as a quasi-musical coupling of movements that continually answer to each other runs the danger of sideline the incommensurabilities, disjunctures, and even conflicts that are often necessary parts of field research in anthropology. These also include power differentials between respondents and ethnographers that in the formative days of anthropology typically favored the anthropologist but nowadays can turn out either way. To deny the influence of a prior intellectual and professional commitment on one’s partaking in the “currents of everyday life” (Ingold 2014: 386) not only raises the risk of dangerous romanticism, but above all means deluding oneself.

**Time and Attention**

What Ingold denounces as an “ulterior purpose” (2014: 386), which is only applied to the encounters with people after they have unfolded—meaning our specific intellectual and institutional interests are often not fully shared by our respondents—does in fact profoundly structure our encounters with people, not only ex post facto. Our purposes affect our anthropological endeavors from the very outset, even before such encounters begin. This has little to do with a “temporal distortion” or “schizochronia,” alluding to an imaginary organic temporal oneness as a tacit standard (see also Jeremy Walton’s related critique in this volume). It is, unlike Ingold (2014: 386) suggests, also unrelated to Fabian’s (1983) allochrony (the denial of temporal coevalness to the people anthropologists write about). If we follow Ingold’s call to engage in correspondence “launched in the current of real time” (Ingold 2014: 389)—and his view that to practice anthropology is to “restore the world to presence, to attend and respond. It is to move forward in real time, not to stop the clock in order to look back” (Ingold 2017b: 24)—we must also be involved in what I call the prospective shaping of ethnography. Phenomenology has taught us that a shared “now” of presence in the current of “real time” is never simply given but is instead the product of constantly intersecting retentions and protentions, and can never be separated from them. In anthropological fieldwork, our professional goals and commitments are a nonnegligible part of the anticipations and memories that are
involved in the very production of presence and the now of “real time” in the encounters we are experiencing.²

We ethnographers are certainly often “caught up in the currents of everyday life” (Ingold 2014: 386), but never quite in the same way, because these currents are not what brought the ethnographer to the field. Anthropologists in their role as ethnographers seek encounters with people in the field because of academic knowledge interests, a rather rarified multigenerational pursuit tied to particular fundamental questions about the nature of social life and its institutional frames. I do not want to suggest that anthropologists cannot through their field experience also pursue other projects alongside the goals of their profession. Also, in the course of time, anthropologists may and often do develop personal friendships with their interlocutors, establishing human bonds that transcend the entire research enterprise. Anthropology, however, is a devotion to a particular intellectual tradition. Its analytical goals are frequently different from our own and our respondent’s other everyday goals and projects. They also result in prospective shaping of our encounters, instead of a “retrospective conversion of our learning” (Ingold 2014: 386), because they inform and color our encounters in the field beforehand and as they unfold. They are the main reason for us to be there and to encounter people in the field.

Certainly, anthropology has certain inbuilt, foundational, and necessary values, without which the pursuit of anthropology would not make sense. These are the notions that every way of life has, in principle, an intrinsic value, and that no way of life, broadly understood, is a priori superior to others.³ Therefore, anthropology needs to strive to make the world more accepting of diversity, and there are situations, such as coming face-to-face with genocide and ethnic cleansing, where the foundational values of anthropology and activism completely overlap. However, most situations anthropologists encounter in fieldwork are far more complex and ambiguous; and in such situations, there will always be a gap between the partisanship of activism and the search for holistic truth.

To me, Ingold’s argument for living with others “attentionally” as opposed to living with others intentionally (Ingold 2014: 389; 2017b: 18–19) also raises questions. By the latter, he means what anthropologists do when they partake in the currents of everyday life with other people, but then use that participation for an ulterior purpose, namely ethnography. In order for this distinction to work, Ingold needs to clearly separate intentions in the sense of a questionable orientation to ulterior goals beyond the act of attending to someone from the more
pervasive intentionality of the fieldworker. From a phenomenological perspective, intentionality, which vastly exceeds conscious acts of volition that are just one among several of its manifestations, is involved in any sort of act or relating-to, including cognitions. This also includes acts of attention—or for that matter, a processual understanding of human action as “becomings” engaged in “humaning” (Ingold 2014: 389). I welcome Ingold’s shift toward forms of attention that do not emerge from conscious volition or are not otherwise consciously directed by a subject. “The key quality that makes a movement attentional lies in its resonance with the movements of the things to which it attends—in its going along with them” (Ingold 2017b: 19). Such nonsubjective movements and forms of attention belong to the most consequential dimensions of social life, and any rich fieldwork experience is full of them. I myself have found the neo-phenomenological analytic of atmospheres (Böhme 1995; Schmitz 2014) useful to think about these forms of attention (Eisenlohr 2018). It is probably no coincidence that Ingold and others resort to the sonic metaphor of resonance in their description, as such forms of attention often involve bodily felt suggestions of movement that do not emerge from subjective volition. But however powerful and central such suprasubjective forms of attention are for social life, including participant observation, they do not make the commitments that distinguish ethnographic research from other kinds of fieldwork less significant. Commitment, a rather conscious act of volition, is indeed the key term here. The intellectual, ethical, and institutional commitments that shape ethnographic fieldwork before it has even begun are much more the substance of a Weberian vocation rather than resembling becomings—Deleuzian or otherwise. Therefore, it is in my view impossible to excise the clearly volitional dimensions that separate ethnographic fieldwork from the multiple other kinds of participant observation directed to rather different goals. Anthropology stands and falls with such commitments, because doing anthropology is a calling.

The Problem of Doing Research with People Who Pursue Projects You Reject

As an admittedly old-fashioned example for the kind of traditional, intellectual, and institutional commitments that may structure our interactions as anthropologists in the field before they even begin, consider this “emeritus rant of the day,” a Facebook post by Marshall Sahlins of 31 August 2017:
What happened to Anthropology as the encompassing human science, the comparative study of the human condition? Why is a century of the first hand ethnography of cultural diversity now ignored in the training and work of anthropologists? Why are graduate students in the discipline ignorant of African segmentary lineages, New Guinea Highlands pig feasts, Naga head-hunting, the kula trade, matrilateral cross cousin marriage, Southeast Asian galactic polities, Fijian cannibalism, Plains Indian warfare, Amazonian animism, Inuit kinship relations, Polynesian mana, Ndembu social dramas, the installation of Shilluk kings or Swazi kings, Azande witchcraft, Kwakiutl potlatches, Australian Aboriginal section systems, Aztec human sacrifice, Siberian shamanism, Ojibwa ontology, the League of the Iroquois, the caste system of India, Inner Asian nomadism, the hau of the Maori gift, the religion of the Ifugao, etc. etc. We are the custodians of this knowledge, and we are content to let it be forgotten. Where else in the university are these things to be taught, or is it that they are not worthy of scholarly contemplation, and should just be confined to the dustbin of intellectual history?

Maybe in a few hundred years, if the human species survives the dark ages of planetary degradation, there will be a cultural renaissance driven by the discovery of some buried or flooded libraries filled with astonishing memoirs of human achievement. (Sahlins, 31 August 2017, quoted in da Col 2017: ii–iii—emphasis mine)

I do not necessarily subscribe to all of this as the core mission for us as anthropologists. But here is the point: the pursuit of such intellectual commitments, whether those listed by Sahlins or a slightly different set, may bring us in Ingoldian correspondence with many of our interlocutors, but not necessarily all of them. Especially interlocutors with activist commitments may sometimes pursue rather different goals than the intellectual commitments that are the reason for anthropology to exist. In discussing correspondence, Ingold makes clear that he does not intend the term to mean sameness and that its mutual responding leaves room for disagreement between the anthropologist and her interlocutors. But in the practice of anthropological fieldwork, there are many examples of tensions, disagreements, and even the breakdown of relationships between anthropologists and informants. Even allowing for differences and disagreements, describing all these in terms of the resonances of Ingoldian correspondence and meshworks would be a stretch, an overestimating of commensurabilities (see also Ladwig’s critique in this volume), as well as a sidelining of impersonal logical relations of rupture, contradiction, and separation in fieldwork that can be central to understanding other worlds, as argued by Arpita Roy, this volume. At the very least, these ideas of what participant observation in anthropology is or should be downplay the divergences and disjunctures between anthropologists and their in-
terlocutors that arise as a result to their commitment to different projects. In his explication of “agencing” as one of the key dimensions of correspondence, Ingold writes, “[I]n the correspondence of agencing, then, there are no volitional subjects, no ‘I’s or ‘you’s to place before any action” (Ingold 2017b: 17). If fieldwork is, as Ingold writes, a practice of correspondence, then fieldwork can be, to take one of Ingold’s examples, like a walk, when you are not the intentional subject doing the walking but when the walking walks you, as a “dwelling in habit” (Ingold 2017b: 16). But is it justified to take such modes of nonvolitional agencing as the condition of participant observation, indeed social life per se, and declare volitional subjectivity an illusion, as Ingold appears to do when he describes participant observation as a practice of correspondence? For many, such experiences of being walked by the walk in resonance with others are moments of a special kind and cannot serve as a general description of what participant observation is or should be. Ethnographers and their interlocutors cannot constantly be joined in dwelling together, responding to each other, as Ingold argues, out of habit and care in non-volitional terms (Ingold 2017b: 10–11, 20–21). Because they may be committed to different projects, they are sooner or later likely to exit out of Ingoldian correspondence, facing each other as subjects whose volitions are at odds with each other. Fieldwork as a nonvolitional flow in dwelling with others can never be an exhaustive description of participant observation. While such correspondence is desirable in many ways, can yield unique insights, and may recur in fieldwork, it does not come to terms with power, conflict, and incommensurable commitments between volitional actors. As a general vision of participant observation, it is therefore out of this world, a world where actors also manipulate and overpower others, treating them as means to other ends.

While disjunctures between the anthropologist’s projects and values and those of people she encounters in the field may imperil correspondence, relationships of correspondence may in turn also emerge in contexts unrelated to anthropology as a project. Following Ingold, it is entirely possible not just to imagine anthropologists, but also others who engage in participant observation, such as missionaries, activists, spies, or guerrillas, to enter into meshwork and practices of correspondence with people in the field, which again raises the question of the fundamentally different projects and values to which these types of fieldworkers are committed. It appears that there is no necessary relationship between fieldwork as correspondence in Tim Ingold’s terms and the values and knowledge interests that are fundamental to anthropology, not just as a discipline but also as a calling.
Let us return to Sahlins’s self-described “rant” quoted above and take an example from it that I was confronted with in my fieldwork in Mauritius concerning caste. This issue necessarily led to a divergence between my academic commitments and the commitments of several of my Mauritian interlocutors. Caste is not supposed to exist in Mauritius, and if its existence is grudgingly acknowledged, there is a local near-consensus that caste in Mauritius has no legitimacy any more. Nevertheless it is undeniable that caste continues to structure entire areas of social life, and not only among Mauritian Hindus; it also has, via Hindu political dominance, a considerable influence on the political system of the entire country (see also Claveyrolas 2017: 159–86). Researchers who directly address the issue of caste in Mauritius are likely to incur the ire of politically well-connected Hindu activists who want to discourage discussion of a subject that, as they see it, fosters division in a “Hindu community” and challenges its boundaries. In contrast, such activists regard unifying such a community and the defense of its boundaries as among their most urgent goals. In that respect, having among other subjects also discussed caste among Hindu Mauritians (Eisenlohr 2006: 66–110, 222, 278, 292–93), I have been much luckier than other ethnographers of Mauritius engaging with the subject. These include Burton Benedict, whose ethnography on Indo-Mauritians—the first anthropological monograph on Mauritius based on field research in the late 1950s in which he documented nonvegetarian, low-caste rituals (Benedict 1961)—was banned in Mauritius. More recently, Suzanne Chazan-Gillig and Pavitrnanand Ramhota’s ethnography on Mauritian Hinduism (Chazan-Gillig and Ramhota 2009) became subject to a factual embargo in Mauritius, because following activist pressure, the Mauritian academic institution that copublished the work refused to distribute it in Mauritius, keeping the two hundred copies sent from France and destined to be sold in Mauritius under lock.4

Every society has a Lebenslüge, a life-structuring lie, or several of them: issues that have a constitutive importance for society but are often denied in “real life.” It hardly needs to be mentioned that this insight has been behind the birth of modern social science, which since its beginnings has been devoted to the analysis of latent but highly consequential social processes and mechanisms that largely unfold outside the awareness and volition of individual human actors, whether from Durkheimian, Marxist, or Weberian perspectives. The anthropological search for a holistic truth also needs to uncover such latent issues or processes, even if that results in a divergence from the wishes and aspirations of some of our interlocutors in the
field and imperils our resonant correspondence with them. Especially during the first half year of my dissertation fieldwork in Mauritius in 1997–98, I encountered a number of Hindutva activists in Mauritius who wrongly assumed that my research on what in Mauritius are officially but misleadingly labeled the “ancestral cultures” and “ancestral languages” of Hindu Mauritians and my knowledge of Hindi implied support for their Hindu nationalist worldview. A few of them tried to instrumentalize me as a foreign academic in order to lend legitimacy to their cause. One was a politically very well-connected public figure who had to be handled with great care. Not only were my own politics at odds with this particular powerful interlocutor, having others perceive me as aligned with her projects and politics would also have been detrimental to the research I wanted to do, as it would likely have antagonized other interlocutors with whom I was eager to engage. I felt I had no choice but to completely withdraw from this unwanted embrace.

That is to say, our projects as anthropologists can be compatible with those of others, but also sometimes not. As much as I was devoted to understanding Hindutva activists on their own terms as far as possible, the Ingoldian call for correspondence and ontological commitment as a way to engage with them would not have seemed plausible to me. Instead, my experience with Hindutva activists in Mauritius raised the themes of noncorrespondence, uncertainty, and the unraveling of relationships in social life, often because actors sought to overpower others. These fundamentals of sociality can also strike in interactions with interlocutors in the field, wherever located. And my encounter with Mauritian Hindu nationalist activists was not really of the kind of ethnography Sindre Bangstad has called “doing research on people we don’t (necessarily) like” (Bangstad 2017), here referring not only to the ethnography of right-wing populism, but also to encounters with informants one truly resents. As much as I rejected their politics, and their attempts to instrumentalize my research for their cause, these particular Mauritian Hindu nationalists were all pleasant and generous interlocutors and even gracious hosts in my encounters with them, an experience that can be disturbing in a different way. These were most charming and helpful people who had never been personally implicated in any acts of violence but nevertheless said things that made me cringe and who were connected to networks of unsavory people in India. If it was implausible for me to live my interactions with these Mauritian Hindu nationalist activists according to Ingold’s call for correspondence and ontological commitment, it would be entirely impossible, if not absurd, in the face
of truly malevolent informants who actively pursue dangerous and reprehensible projects. I would, for example, not be able to inhabit an ontological commitment or live in resonant correspondence while doing research on, say, neo-Nazis in my own German society. Such interlocutors also often have distinct ideas about the people with whom one should study and learn from that are incompatible with any anthropological perspective, a point related to Irfan Ahmad’s critique in this volume. While this might be an extreme example, it is certain that anthropological field research on right-wing populist and ethno-nationalist movements worldwide involves similar challenges, and that Ingoldian correspondence and ontological commitment would be rather unhelpful categories to describe many of the relationships between anthropologists and their informants in such movements. In such settings, it is easily imaginable that, for example, activists of a certain persuasion would be in relationships of correspondence and ontological commitment with the people they work with in the field in ways that would be difficult for an anthropologist.

Resonance and Its Disavowal

There is another widespread condition that anthropologists face in the contemporary world that, in my view, make it very difficult, if not impossible, to stick to the notions of anthropological fieldwork that Ingold advocates. Ingold’s vision of anthropological fieldwork is remarkably untimely. It is more evocative of Heidegger’s doubtlessly idealized Black Forest craftspeople and farmers almost a century ago than contemporary settings in a globalized world where we all partake in public spheres with long-distance ramifications to a much greater extent and where we are, therefore, inevitably confronted with the themes of sociability among strangers and impersonal forms of address. We conduct fieldwork in settings that are also thoroughly mediated by discourse, images, sounds, and ideologies that do not emerge from these settings or their flows of everyday life and are furthermore relatively independent from the local contexts in which they are taken up. Such settings are thus difficult to imagine, mainly in terms of a “meshwork” of entanglements between the anthropologists and her interlocutors that, expanding on Ingold’s use of the sonic metaphor of resonance (Ingold 2017b: 19; see also Ingold 2011: 178), would yield a kind of correspondence that resembles what William Mazzarella has called mimetic resonance. Mazzarella identifies the term with Peter Sloterdijk’s sonic metaphor of constitutive resonance (Sloterdijk 2011): “Con-
stitutive resonance suggests a relation of mutual becoming rather than causal determination” (Mazzarella 2017: 5). Ingold insists that meshworks have loose ends and can be potentially spun further indefinitely. But here, the question of scale comes in, putting in question the usefulness of the meshwork metaphor. I think it is safe to assume that the great majority of anthropologists who conduct fieldwork today do so in settings that partake in different scales of circulation, up to the global, and are rather removed from the more pastoral settings of resonant correspondence with one’s interlocutors. But this particular condition of most field sites today taken aside, that they are part of public spheres and shot through with its attendant media practices with global ramifications, ethnographic fieldwork can as a matter of principle never only be about the kind of ontological commitment and correspondence that deserves to be called mimetic or constitutive resonance. As Mazzarella has put it, “One of the most remarkable things about the anthropological approach—participant observation—is the way it turns constitutive encounter into method, ambivalently both affirming and disavowing mimetic resonance” (Mazzarella 2017: 21). Tim Ingold’s rejection of the term “ethnographic” is motivated by the affirmation of such resonance, while overlooking the need for its simultaneous disavowal. Even if such resonance is not sameness, it aims for a kind of nonseparation between an anthropologist and her interlocutors that recalls somatic attunement. However, anthropology is also about confronting the field with categories such as comparative concepts and languages that do not emerge from it. An exclusive stress on correspondence, ontological commitment, and constitutive resonance in field research would evacuate the need for anthropology; there would just be an organic wholeness.

**Comparison**

Tim Ingold’s suggestion that anthropologists are still committed to an understanding of comparison as the search for nomothetic universals paints an inaccurate picture of anthropologists’ actual engagements with comparison and universals. Ingold agrees that anthropology is fundamentally comparative, “because for any path life might take, it could have taken other paths” (Ingold 2017a: 22). In a similar vein, he has made a case for anthropology as comparative in the following terms: “The endeavour [anthropology] is essentially comparative, but what it compares are not bounded objects or entities but ways of being. It is the constant awareness of alternative ways of being, and of the
ever-present possibility of ‘flipping’ from one to another, that defines the anthropological attitude. It lies in what I would call the ‘sideways glance’” (Ingold 2008: 84). Tim Ingold, therefore, does not reject comparison as such but thinks that such comparison should not involve the relating of our encounters in the field to broader comparative categories and themes. Ingold furthermore claims that anthropologists who consider their empirical method to be ethnography unwittingly commit to a logic of merely collecting empirical data for subsequent theoretical generalizations (Ingold 2014: 390–91). I think this is a misrepresentation of what most anthropologists do, and not just because theorizing shapes ethnographic fieldwork long before it begins. It is also questionable to assume, like Ingold does, that when anthropologists take their interactions in the field to be ethnography they become engaged in a search for generalizations as objective laws or structures of the sort that structural functionalists such as Radcliffe-Brown were after. The distinction, going back to Max Weber, between universals as ideal types versus real types is crucial here (Weber 1949: 90). As I see it, addressing the broader questions to which anthropology attends is impossible without more general comparative categories and notions understood as hypothetical ideal types, not objective universals, and to abandon them would amount to giving up the discipline as a whole. Identifying comparison on the basis of ethnography with positivist data-collecting and the subsequent building of real type generalizations on their basis is a caricature of comparativist scholarship that has little to do with the sophisticated and self-reflexive forms of comparison anthropologists have engaged in.

In his latest intervention in the debate on ethnography, Ingold writes that ethnography is logically dependent on the distinction between idiographic and nomothetic sciences (Windelband 1980), and that understanding participant observation as ethnography commits one to this distinction (Ingold 2017a: 22; see also Ingold 2008). Because it has been shown long ago that this distinction is impossible to uphold, I find implausible Ingold’s suggestion that in calling what they do ethnography many anthropologists have been oblivious of the untenability of the idiographic–nomothetic distinction. Against those that take ethnography to be mainly idiographic, anthropologists have long known that there is no such thing as a pure, singular description free from more general assumptions and theories. This is not just because anthropologists produce their accounts in a narrow range of languages, English being by far the most powerful among them, and their categories, thereby depending on the semiotic types built into them. Max Weber taught us more than a century ago that value judg-
ments are responsible for the selection of a particular scholarly issue, and that such judgments do not just emerge from the social processes we study, but also result from prior theories, knowledge interests, and other broader assumptions that are themselves historical (Weber 1949). Such value judgments are also responsible for the more generalized ideal types we inevitably draw on in our descriptions. The latter are also the result of our knowledge interests—that is, value judgments of what anthropologists find significant and relevant in the infinite flux of life (unlike Marxists and structural-functionalists, who believe in real types). It is important to note that a processual ontology like the one Ingold favors in his anthropological writings is not incompatible with ideal types as tentative universals, only with the Marxist and structural-functionalist assumption of universals as real types, arrived at through nomothetic sifting through units of “data” or “case studies.” Ingold denounces the search for universals through comparison, because “any such universals, however, are abstractions of our own, and as Whitehead was the first to point out, it is a fallacy to imagine that they are concretely instantiated in the world as a substrate for human variation” (Ingold 2008: 90). However, only the assumption of real types, not of ideal types, is subject to what Ingold, following Whitehead, has denounced as the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Whitehead 1938: 66, cited in Ingold 2008: 90). Also, through hermeneutic theory, we have long known that any interpretative act draws on prior judgments, assumptions, generalizations, and theories of what we are confronted with, and that these are a necessary precondition for any interpretative rapprochement, let alone a fusion of horizons (Gadamer 1975). I welcome Ingold’s call to overcome the idiographic-nomothetic distinction, but there are not many anthropologists who would conceive their work along such lines today, nor does calling what they do ethnography commit anthropologists to this distinction in any way.

If there is one thing that would rob anthropology of relevance and a public voice it would be the dismissal of broader comparative themes central to an understanding of the contemporary world, such as nationalism, religion, extreme forms of social inequality, “populism,” changes in media-driven public spheres, sustainability, and so on. The challenge for anthropology is not to get rid of these ideal-typical categories, but to retheorize them in a way that goes beyond the European origins of several of these terms. Anthropologists necessarily and unavoidably bring these broader themes and the knowledge interests tied to them to the ethnographic encounter. Having become global categories through the colonial encounter, themes such as the nation,
religion, ethnolinguistic identity, and the public sphere have in any case long become part of the lifeworlds of our interlocutors, wherever they may be. Indeed, the activists among them often engage in nationalization and religionization in ways that make the gaps between their and anthropologists’ commitments glaringly apparent. Turning away from such ideal types and comparative themes and denouncing them as alienating universals in the name of a resonant oneness with one’s respondents in the field and the flows of everyday life in which we encounter them is not just abandoning ethnography but anthropology itself.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have made a case for distinguishing between participant observation as an ethnographic encounter and participant observation geared toward multiple different, nonanthropological ends. I have argued that anthropology is a calling that requires volitional commitment to particular values and knowledge interests that shape fieldwork long before it begins and give it its ethnographic character. The commitments and interests tied to anthropological fieldwork often sharply diverge from the commitments and interests that drive the participant observation of the activist, the guerilla, the spy, the market researcher, or the long-term tourist. Maintaining this distinction is crucial, and using the term “ethnographic” to point to the specificity of anthropological fieldwork is important. The professional commitments of anthropologists often provide a fruitful basis for working together with interlocutors in the field. They also sometimes bring us into conflict with the goals and commitments of some of our interlocutors who may for example pursue activist projects that the anthropologist is bound to reject. Understanding fieldwork as quasi-musical correspondence and nonvolitional dwelling with others as Tim Ingold does is unhelpful for coming to terms with such conflicts of interests and commitments in the field. Not just anthropologists, but also missionaries, spies, activists, journalists, and guerrillas can enter into Ingoldian meshwork and correspondence with people while doing fieldwork. However, this cutting of correspondence across professional roles does not make the divergence in values and knowledge interests that separate the anthropologist’s work from those of others less relevant. If anything, it makes such differences more salient and important. Ingold’s understanding of participant observation as meshwork and dwelling in correspon-
dence is also remote from the realities and scales of field sites in the contemporary world where the anthropologists and her interlocutors very often partake in public spheres with their anonymous form of address and global circulation of images and discourse. Finally, I have argued that unlike Ingold suggests, understanding fieldwork as ethnographic does in no way commit anthropologists to the reduction of fieldwork encounters to “data” to be fed into the nomothetic search for universals. As a comparative discipline, anthropology necessarily involves drawing on concepts and categories with universal pretensions. Rather than searching for nomothetic real types such as universal laws and structures as structural-functionalists and Marxists used to do, many anthropologists’ theorizing cannot be captured with the ideographic–nomothetic opposition. Instead, it seems that nowadays many anthropologists follow a Weberian understanding of social science. Having abandoned the search for timeless and holistic explanatory models, they approach the comparative concepts that their discipline necessarily depends upon with hermeneutic sensibilities, treating them as provisional, ideal-typical universals that are themselves historical.

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Notes

1. In a related vein, in this volume Hatsuki Aishima addresses similar disjunctures and divergences while teaching anthropology to members of communities with whom anthropologists study.

2. Ingold actually argues along related lines in his reflections on longing as a key dimension of correspondence. According to him, longing “brings together the activities of remembering and imagining. Both are ways of presencing: remembering presences the past; imagining presences the future” (Ingold 2017b: 21). But in participant observation understood as Ingoldian correspondence, why should this presencing as remembering and imagining exclude the anthropologist’s professional formation and commitments?

3. At this point, there is an overlap between the intellectual commitments of anthropology and its responsibilities in the world. In a recent exchange about Ingold’s provocations on ethnography, Daniel Miller wrote that “anthropology has greater responsibilities to the world that just its own intellectual conceit” (Miller 2017: 30). However, at the core, the foundational values of anthropology, its intellectual commitments, and its responsibility in the world are one and the same.

4. “Dr Suzanne Chazan-Gillig, anthropologue: A Maurice, les castes sont toujours un sujet tabou,” *Week-End*, 16 July 2017. No explanation was given by the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for the nondistribution of the book in Mauritius, and it is difficult to ascertain what the actual reasons for the factual embargo were. Given that the book went into the details of the highly sensitive issue of the nexus of caste, ritual, and politics in Mauritius, it seems rather likely that the book’s treatment of this subject motivated its factual nonrelease by the copublishing Mauritian institute. The book’s release in France was unimpeded. In the meantime, the book’s factual embargo appears to have ended and it has begun to circulate in Mauritius as well.

5. “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (*Gedankenbild*). In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (*Gedankenbild*) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia” (Weber 1949: 90).

References


