AN ANTHROPOLOGY BEYOND CULTURE AND SOCIETY: INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA TOREN

Interviewed by Guilherme Moreira Fians
Introduction and revision
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The interviewed person in this issue is the anthropologist Christina Toren. Christina is Australian by birth, she graduated in Psychology from University College London and gained her Ph.D in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Currently, she holds a professorial chair at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland.

Her interest in human beings' complexity and variance took her to study the processes whereby we become who we are. Through a constant interface between Psychology and Anthropology and extensive use of data from her fieldwork in Fiji, Christina has enormously contributed to studies on kinship, hierarchy, rituals, religious conversion and epistemology. She has also been amongst the researchers responsible for legitimating the inclusion of children as informants, alongside adults, and an ethnographic focus on children’s ideas, which has begun to be considered as a proper anthropological object of study.

Toren also has formulated important critiques of the use of concepts like culture and society in Anthropology. According to her, when we argue in terms of culture, we are necessarily invoking the nature-culture dualism and, taking this opposition as given, we are unable to make our informants’ categories work analytically in our ethnographies. Among other contemporary anthropologists working in British universities such as Marilyn Strathern and Tim Ingold, Toren makes her own critical effort to dismantle the objectification of society as a taken for granted reality. These are some of the issues discussed in this interview.

Christina Toren is also member of the Editorial Council of Revista Habitus, and had given us this interview by e-mail on May 2013. For a greater view of her work and researches, visit: http://st-andrews.academia.edu/ChristinaToren

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Revista Habitus: In your studies in Fiji, you do not only try to understand Fiji, but you also use your fieldwork as a starting point to propose a unified model of the human being. Did you go there with these ideas in mind or did they come along your fieldwork?

Christina Toren: The unified model, as I now think of it, is the end product of my continuing concern to understand and explain how we become who we are. It’s the work of years.
Perhaps I should give a very brief account of it here. Its starting point is the question of how we theorise mind. My formulation is as follows: in respect of any one of us, mind is a function of the whole person that is constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the environing world. The constituting process is to be understood as at once biological, social, and psychological, such that at any given time, in all aspects of our being, each one of us manifests the history of social relations that continues to make us who we are.

I shall have to continue to think and write about this unified model because there are aspects of it I have yet to explain in detail. For example, I’ve written somewhere that because, like all other living things, we humans inhere in the world, it is given to us to find out and objectify its aspects as a function of consciousness. The challenge for the human scientist – for the anthropologist in particular – is to demonstrate the historical processes that continue, over time, to give rise to the ontologies and entailed epistemologies that at once unite and differentiate us humans through time and across regions of the world.

I went off to the field in 1981 with straightforwardly theoretical interests concerning the constitution of ideas. In the early 1980s we talked of the symbolic as if it was a separable domain. So in my 1986 PhD thesis, for example, where I was examining the Fijian idea that hierarchy is to be taken for granted as fundamental to social organization, I made a distinction between the use of above/below to distinguish between different planes, and symbolic above/below to distinguish hierarchically between people. I’m amazed, looking back on it, how long I held to this unwieldy and indeed unworkable distinction. When it came to publishing the book derived from the thesis, however, I dropped the distinction entirely because by that time I had realised that it simply confused the issue. I argued for a microhistorical model of learning as a cognitive process, but it was a long way from there to the unified model that I argue for now.

**Revista Habitus:** What has taken you to do fieldwork in Fiji Islands?

**Christina Toren:** Chance, really. At the time my son was young and I was especially concerned that my fieldwork site be good for him. I could not justify going to a place where he might catch a serious illness – malaria, for example. So that rather limited my options. Also, at the time I thought that what I wanted to do was going to be very difficult, so I wanted to have in hand good language sources, good studies of kinship and so on, so that I would not have to start from scratch. My supervisor at the LSE was Maurice Bloch, he suggested the Pacific and in the end I chose Fiji. I made the right choice I think. It is a wonderful place, of inexhaustible interest. I was fortunate too in that George Milner (who was later one of the examiners of my PhD) had written an excellent Fijian Grammar for the Bauan language and the book included helpful kinship diagrams. I was working in central Fiji, so this work was tremendously useful to me.
Revista Habitus: Fiji may be considered a place strongly marked by conflicts, as political conflicts – due to dictatorship – and also religious conflicts, derived of the not always harmonious contact among traditional beliefs in ancestors, Indo-Fijians and Fijians converted to Christianity. This considered, how is doing fieldwork in Fiji?

Christina Toren: I do not think of Fiji as a place “strongly marked by conflicts”. Fijians and Indo Fijians have lived alongside one another for over one hundred years and it could just as well be said that there has been remarkably little conflict between them, given what might have been possible. Profound political differences – yes, certainly. Fijians are by law not able to alienate land; land is held in trust, as it were, by clans and other groups who have the use of it but who cannot sell it (a law brought in by the British colonial government). This looks fundamentally unfair from an Indo Fijian perspective because it means they have little or no access to land and have to make a living in the commercial and professional sectors. This can be very difficult indeed and many Indo Fijians have a difficult time. By the same token, it is this law relating to their land-holdings that has saved indigenous Fijians from total impoverishment. Rural Fijians maintain a mixed subsistence and cash economy, where money is always wanting, and the land is the very basis of their lives. They belong to the land and without it they could not live. That said, it is also the case that by and large Fijians and Indo Fijians continue to lead very separate lives and have very little understanding of one another. Given their very different lived histories, and in the continuing absence of democratic government and freedom of the press, it is difficult to see how, in the foreseeable future, any genuine understanding is to be achieved.

As to religious beliefs well, all the Fijians I know are Christians and for them the ancestors come under the sway of the Christian god and Christianity takes on Fijian forms. There is some apparently developing conflict here, exacerbated by the current political situation, so far as I can tell from a distance, but until recently it was the case that people moved pretty freely between denominations and, despite differences in doctrine and ritual practice, they recognized one another as Christians and as kin. This continues to be true, by and large, even in the face of the competition between the various Christian denominations – Methodist, Pentecostalist, and Catholic, for example – because it is still the case that kinship informs every dimension of the lives of indigenous Fijians and all Fijians are kin to one another. At least this is the case for the Fijians I know anything at all about in town and village and also overseas.

It may interest you to know that the current government has decreed that the term Fijian should be an inclusive term referring only to citizenship and that indigenous Fijians should be called Itaukei; the conventional English translation for this term is owner but it could equally well be translated as one who belongs. Certainly this is the indigenous Fijian idea – that you belong to the place that is ancestrally yours, where you have use rights in land you hold in trust. So, for example, if you are an indigenous Fijian, your true village (koro dina) is to be found in the vanua (land, place, country) of which you are yourself a manifestation, irrespective of whether you were born in that village or have actually lived there. The ancestral realm is continuous with that of living humans, so ties to land do not just lie in the past, they are lived as present because
the ancestors are all still here, inhabiting and continuing to manifest themselves in the places that were theirs in life.

To answer your question: Fiji is a fascinating place to do fieldwork.

**Revista Habitus:** What are the main theoretical influences of your researches?

**Christina Toren:** I suppose Volosinov first and foremost – his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* was a revelation; it demolishes the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* and is just superb in respect of its demonstration that meanings are uniquely made – every time. Likewise *The Making of the English Working Class* by E.P. Thompson made me very aware of history as lived.

Piaget was a major influence, in large part because of his realization that to understand humans you have to understand how they arrive at the ideas they hold about the world and one another – i.e. you have to study how children constitute ideas. What made me recognize his genius, however, was his little book *Structuralism* which was one of his last works and from which it is clear that his cognitive scheme is a *self-regulating transformational system* – it is autopoietic, that is to say self-creating or self-producing. This is indeed the insight of a biologist and it makes Piaget’s work wonderfully useable, because it provides for an idea of cognitive development over time as a microhistorical process – an idea I came up with in my PhD thesis. This idea enabled me to deal at once with continuity and change in the ideas and practices of a single person, and in the ideas and practices of different generations, and so to make Bourdieu’s habitus operational. I could see when I first read (in 1979) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* that the habitus was not inherently transformational and for this reason could not work but, having rendered it operational, I quite quickly abandoned the idea as unnecessary. I remain grateful to Bourdieu however for his observation that the task of the anthropologist is to understand how people become enchanted by ideas they themselves have made.

The work of biologists Maturana and Varela, which I read in the early 1990s enabled me to think of human autopoiesis in general as a microhistorical process, one that takes in every aspect of human being – our genes and our thoughts are through and through historical products. Any given one of us has no choice but to go on and on manifesting our history and making it. And then there is Merleau-Ponty, especially his *Phenomenology of Perception*, which has been tremendously important for me. But perhaps the single most influential writer for me is Proust. I’ve been reading *In Search of Lost Time* since my early 20s. I’ve read the whole work three times from beginning to end and since then I now and again pick up a volume and read parts. Proust’s depth of understanding of people and time is enthralling and he has an ethnographic eye for detail – for relations between people, for every aspect of their lives, their bodies, their clothes, what they eat, how they move, how they feel, what they think; everything is in Proust.
**Revista Habitus:** In the book *Key Debates in Anthropology*, edited by Tim Ingold, you take part in a debate in which you defend, together with anthropologist Marylin Strathern, the obsolescence of the concept of *society*. What criticisms do you formulate of the use of this concept?

**Christina Toren:** We were arguing that the idea of society is *theoretically* obsolete in the sense that it could not help us to understand people who had no such idea of themselves. An entailed problem, for both of us, was that ‘society’ carries in its train the idea of ‘the individual’ – the collectivity characterized as society, the person characterized as individual. Strathern’s seminal work in *The Gender of the Gift* argued for the primacy of social relations as an analytical tool and an idea of the Melanesian person as dividual, ideas in accord with her brilliant comparative ethnographic analysis of Melanesian ideas and practices. When Marilyn asked me to take part in the 1989 debate I felt honored, for she was a full professor, occupying the Chair of Social Anthropology at Manchester, and I was just a beginner [1].

But I am digressing. The anthropologist’s task, as I see it, is to make the concepts we encounter work analytically. In other words, you have to make indigenous concepts do analytical work. You can’t do that if you insist on using your own analytical terms, which may indeed seriously distort the ideas and practices on which they are brought to bear. Of course, if you are working with people who take the idea of *society* for granted – as do large numbers of people in the U.K. for instance, or in France, or elsewhere – then it is your task as an anthropologist to find out not only what that term means to people (in other words, to interpret it), but also to show how it comes to be the case that among your informants *society* is taken for granted as self-evidently real, material. To render a term analytical is to show how, for the people who use it, it comes to have a material purchase on the world as lived, such that the world confirms it as real.

**Revista Habitus:** In some of your writings, you criticize the concept of *culture*. Which would be the main problems brought by the use of this concept in Anthropology?

**Christina Toren:** I have never found the idea of culture useful. Considered as analytical tools, *culture* and *society* raise rather similar problems; society complements the individual, culture complements biology. The use of culture as an analytical tool carries in its train the idea that there is another domain – that of biology, or nature – that is its complement or counterpart. Explanations that depend on the idea that humans have an underlying biological nature and an overlaid culture distort what it is to be human. I cannot agree that there is a domain of the universal (biology) and a domain of the relative (culture); this makes no sense to me. Moreover, you will find, once you begin to examine the distinction, that it does not hold. If the capacity for culture is given to us biologically (which it has to be if we are to manifest it), and if it has axiomatically to be distinguished from perception (which it has to be if the biology-culture distinction is to make any sense), then the idea of culture becomes utterly incoherent and is surely not much good as an explanation. The idea has a powerful hold on a good number of
people throughout the world, but again it is by no means universal. I recommended above an ethnographic analysis of the idea of society. Likewise, I recommend an ethnographic analysis of the idea of culture as used by people who take it for granted. An in-depth study would be able to demonstrate how the idea of culture is constituted and how, in being constituted, it comes to be lived as real.

**Revista Habitus:** Considering this issue related to the concept of *culture*, what could be maintained, questioned and rethought on the thinking based on Culturalism? And which concepts, ideas or methodological perspective could supplant culture in anthropological studies?

**Christina Toren:** From my point of view, this issue is simple once you understand that literally everything about humans is a product of history as lived. Every aspect of my being as a particular person, from my genes to my physiological characteristics, to everything I do and say, to every thought I have had and will have, is the artifact of the transforming history that goes on and on making me who I am. I am a product of a long, long history of social relations that continues to transform me over time from birth to death. I manifest that history in all my physiological characteristics and in everything I do and say and think. My continuity through time is that of a *self-regulating transformational system* – everything about me transforms over time but it does so as a function of an autonomous self-regulating system which has sociality at its core.

It is important to be clear that autopoiesis as self-creation or self-regulation is not to be confused with choice, free-will and agency. We do not make ourselves at will. We humans cannot be human outside relations with others who inform who we are and we are embedded along with those others in an environing world. Intersubjectivity is an historical process that provides at once for continuity and change, such that we humans transform the conditions of our existence even as we live them. Once we understand history as lived, it becomes clear not only that we have no need of culture as an analytical category, but also that it gets in the way of our understanding of peoples who do not make use of it.

**Revista Habitus:** How do you deal with Piaget’s idea of Genetic Epistemology? In general, by and large due to our formation, Brazilian anthropologists are not used to dealing with theories from Psychology...

**Christina Toren:** As I said earlier, I find Piaget’s ideas essential. His driving interest was to understand how the *necessity* that seems to be given in our categories of time, number, space and so on could be the outcome of a process of cognitive constitution over time, rather than a given function of mind as Kant had argued. He did a brilliant job of demonstrating that people have to *constitute* their ideas of the world. Piaget’s universal model of developmental stages has long been discredited – indeed this was the case in the late 1970s when I was studying...
Psychology – and we have superb studies that show abilities in newborn babies that would have astounded him. This said, Piaget’s fundamental ideas remain extraordinarily useful: (i) the idea of the scheme as a self-regulating transformational system, (ii) the constitution of the scheme over time as a matter of differentiation through functioning, (iii) the inevitability of this process and the necessity that is its outcome. That babies are born with abilities he saw as emerging much later does not, in itself, discredit his approach; rather it makes development inside the womb and out a faster and more complex process than we had previously been able to recognize. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s view that “the body is our general medium for having a world” (1962: 146) accords with Piaget’s insistence on sensori-motor or practical intelligence as the foundation for the development of logical categories. There are a good number of psychologists who might be described as neo-Piagetians.

What I claim for my own work, is that it shows how these ideas can be embedded in a model that recognizes that history is not something external to what it is to be human, but rather that everything about us manifests the historical processes that we live. So, for example, putting these ideas into practice enabled me to reveal precisely how the rural Fijians among whom I worked in the 1980s arrived at the idea that hierarchy is a given principle of social organization. We might do a similar study among, say, middle-class people in the UK or the USA, to uncover the process through which people come to take for granted the idea that democracy is self-evidently the only proper form of government.

**Revista Habitus:** How can one discuss the opposition of *nature* and *culture* - one of the major questions in Anthropology - from the point of view of a dialogue between Anthropology and Psychology? What can be thought about the many ways as those disciplines, among others like Genetics, deal with this opposition?

**Christina Toren:** The major problem as I see it is that the nature-culture opposition tends to inform Anthropology in much the same way as it does Psychology. After all, the idea of *cultural construction* is everywhere in our own discipline, is it not? I think I am right in saying that its original source is to be found in academic psychology – at least this is where I first came across it in respect of children in the work of Kessen (1983). It will be apparent, I am sure, that I find theories of *cultural construction* and *social construction* equally unhelpful. If, as I argue, our lived history continually manifests itself uniquely in each one of us, it follows that the genetic dimension of my being is a function of a long, long, long history of social relations, just like every other dimension of what I am. I should point out here that mine is pretty much a lone voice. The social sciences are dominated by cognitivists who have very little difficulty in accommodating to some idea of nature-and-culture (however incoherent) as applicable across disciplinary boundaries. And even dynamic systems theorists and biological phenomenologists like Evan Thompson still hold to an idea of culture as a domain of explanation.
There is, however, an anthropological approach from ethnography that might form the basis of a discussion between anthropologists and psychologists and be used to address the nature–culture distinction. I am referring here to the work of Marilyn Strathern, Nancy Munn, Roy Wagner, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Jadran Mimica, Marcio Goldman, Peter Gow, Alexandra Ouroussoff and others who recognize in one way or another that ontology and epistemology are aspects of one another. This is the crucial conceptual move because it enables you to realize that nature–culture is an historically constituted idea of the world and human being.

As I see it, the ethnographic analyses of the anthropologists I am referring to show that the relation between ontology and epistemology is not properly characterized as *dialectical* but rather as apparent – like the *two sides* of the continuous surface that is a Moebius strip, or the presenting face of the perceptual illusion given by a Necker cube which, in presenting itself, obviates the others. Take *From the Enemy’s Point of View*, for example, or *The Fame of Gawa or The Incest Passions*, or *An Amazonian Myth and Its History*, or *How Democracy Works*, or *Wall Street at War*. Each of these superb works demonstrates how ethnography is able to realize and bring home to the reader the historical realities that people live – not as cultural overlays on a biological base, but as self-evidently given to them as real, which does not, of course, in any way rule out scepticism and questioning as entirely possible and indeed likely.

The problem here, of course, is that the work of these anthropologists is often enough taken to be *too difficult* even by anthropologists, from which it follows that making the work accessible to other human scientists (psychologists and sociologists) is likely to prove problematic. Even so, I think we have no choice but to continue to strive after some kind of conceptual rapprochement, which is why I insist on describing myself as a human scientist. I argue that my unified model is good for psychologists as well as anthropologists, even while I know that it is likely to be rejected outright by psychologists because it is not amenable to conventional hypothesis testing in the sense that it cannot be falsified.

**Revista Habitus:** What one can think about the idea of *human nature*? Is it possible and in what level is it valid to think in aspects inherent to human beings in general? How studies on ontogeny could be related to this question?

**Christina Toren:** No doubt it is clear from what I’ve said so far that I do not hold with the idea of human nature. I do, however, hold that each one of us is, in every single respect, a continually transforming product of a lived past that we at once manifest and project into our continuing present. I have no choice but to make sense of the world and other people and I do so in terms of the ideas and practices that I have constituted as mine as a function of the microhistorical processes that go on and on making me who I am. I argue that this is the case for every one of us.
**Revista Habitus:** The article *The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man*, from the book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, written by Clifford Geertz, was a strong influence in many Brazilian anthropologists in the period of its publication. What do you consider of the Geertz's discussion of “what make human beings become who they are”?

**Christina Toren:** I had to read Geertz too, of course, as a student and his idea of culture had a significant impact on anthropologists in the UK. I was not, however, even momentarily enchanted by it.

To take just one aspect, for Geetz “culture is public because meaning is”. Surely that cannot be so. We may be siblings and we may live, say, ostensibly the same day-to-day existence and even so, despite the depth of history we have in common, we differentiate that history in and through our own persons and in so doing constitute different ideas concerning what might be referred to as the same lived conditions. Certainly this is the case for me and my siblings.

Geertz refers to “cultural patterns” as “transmitted” and “inherited” but this is never the case. Indeed “transmission” and “inheritance” pose real problems even in respect of our physiology.

To see that this is so, you have only to consider the facts of sexual reproduction, to say nothing of the epigenetic conditions of development in the womb. For example, the existential conditions lived by my mother during her pregnancy with me were different from those she lived during the gestation of each one of my five siblings. This is obvious, but it is also crucial. Every single dimension of our being that one might want to address – and here I am referring specifically to me and my siblings – is informed by it. And we’re no different from anyone else in this regard. History produces continuity as a function of differentiation. This is an observation, not a paradox. Continuity and transformation are aspects of one another. So, when it comes to meaning, it can no more be “transmitted” or “inherited” than our physiology except in the loosest sense. Each one of us makes meaning out of meanings that we encounter, and this is as much a process of transformation as a process of continuity.

In other words, we may be native speakers of the same language, but this cannot guarantee that I understand what you say except perhaps if we confine ourselves to the simplest demonstrable declarations – “the milk is on the table”, “it is raining” – and even in respect of these simplest uses of language it takes time to constitute for oneself what their meaning is. I am referring here to children’s learning their native language as a process in which each child has to constitute that language for him or herself. The work of Tomasello and others demonstrates precisely this process.

In short, the idea of culture has never made sense to me, not just because it is slippery in itself, but because its counterpart – nature or biology – is taken to be conceptually separable dimension of human being that functions according to quite different laws.
Revista Habitus: In the text Do babies have culture? - on which you review a book written by anthropologist Alma Gottlieb - you state that more than in an anthropology of infancy or childhood, you are interested in thinking an anthropology more involved with epistemology, and to have children as the main natives, as authentic objects of study. Could you comment on this issue, anthropology about children and anthropology involving children?

Christina Toren: Indeed I have always argued against the idea that what we want is an anthropology of childhood. What I do argue for, however, is the routine inclusion of children in our ethnographies on the grounds that systematic research with children enables the anthropologist to uncover the knowledge processes that are giving rise to the concepts adults use to describe themselves and the world. But this kind of research is revealing only to the extent that it bears on adults of all ages as well as children of all ages. What you find out from observing babies and talking to five-year-olds (for example) is not going to be what you find out from observing and talking to older children, teenagers, adults, the middle-aged and old people. This said, the inclusion of children in your research can give you privileged access to material you could not obtain by any other means. Children have to make sense of conditions in the world created by adults and If, as an anthropologist, you can find out what sort of sense they’re making and how they are doing so, then you can actually demonstrate not only the process that constitutes people’s lived realities, but their historical necessity.

Moreover, we can use this method to understand and explain ourselves as well as others. In all cases, however, is important to ensure that the research methods include long-term participant observer fieldwork and the obsessional writing of fieldnotes, as well as, later on in the research, systematic cross-sectional study of children from as young as possible to age 14 or so. Even if you’re working “down the road” in, say, a middle class neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, a minimum of 12 months fieldwork is crucial precisely because as (perhaps) a native yourself, you are likely to take for granted much of what is taken for granted by your informants. So you need to do all the same work that is routinely done by anthropologists with people whom they don’t know at all. In other words, you have find out about kinship, religion, day-to-day political economy, ritual and ritualized behaviors, personhood and sociality, domestic life, schooling, and so on. You need to do this initial work in order to find out where you should later focus your systematic research efforts with children. Only a thoroughgoing social analysis is able to uncover how relations between people are informing the constitution of ideas over time. And yes, it’s a tall order, but in the end no more demanding than any thoroughgoing ethnographic endeavour.

Revista Habitus: It is common to have educators and psychologists, among others, studying children socialization process. Why do you consider the notion of socialization inappropriate?

Christina Toren: Each child has to make sense for him or herself of the peopled world. In the most simple terms, what the child does (what anyone of us does) is make meaning out of meanings that others have made and are making. This is an autopoietic – self-creating, self-
producing, self-regulating – process in which meanings are inevitably more or less transformed in the very process of being constituted. This process is not correctly characterised as socialization which implies not merely a certain passivity in the one who is socialized, but also a more or less unproblematic continuity over time.

**Revista Habitus:** What is the role or the importance that materiality, the concreteness of the world, played in your process of making meaning of the world? Besides, you say that we make our own meanings out of the meanings made by other human beings, with which we made contact in the peopled world, right? How could one think the influence of materiality and non-humans in general in this process of producing meanings?

**Christina Toren:** I am a materialist through and through. For me everything about the world and human being is material. So, when it comes to gods, ancestors, spirits, souls, ghosts, witches, angels, saints, demons and so on, the fundamental thing is to realize that the existence of these entities is materially confirmed by the world. I say this because I know in principle that it must be so, even though I myself can credit their existence only at secondhand, as known by my Fijian informants, for example.

I am a rationalist, and like anyone else I think my own fundamental ideas are self-evidently correct and demonstrable, from which it would seem to follow that others must be wrong. At the same time, as an anthropologist, I know that other people are equally sure that I am entirely incorrect and they know better. What about all those people who, for example, know for sure that there is a human spirit that at death departs to another realm? The world materially confirms this as true, even while it confirms the opposed truth for me. And why not? The peopled world is inexhaustible in its possibilities because we inhere in it, project into it our own historically constituted certainties, and find them confirmed. So for example, I am sure that a dimension of mind that we might characterize as unconscious manifests itself materially in the very workings of my body – in headaches, let us say, or forgetting, or slips of the tongue. I would argue that the unconscious is materially demonstrable. Meanwhile, many a neuroscientist and cognitive psychologist is equally sure that I am demonstrably wrong.

**Revista Habitus:** You call our attention to the importance of taking into consideration the micro-historical process that constitutes human beings. Taking this as a starting point, should we think history as something inherent to each one of us?

**Christina Toren:** Yes indeed. I think that it will be clear from what I have said so far that for me history is what we live and what we manifest in every aspect of our humanity.

**Revista Habitus:** Besides post-graduate studies, Anthropology is taught in Brazilian universities mainly by undergraduate courses in Social Sciences. These courses are composed of www.habitus.ifcs.ufrj.br
disciplines from areas such as Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science. Considering that in most of your works you promote a dialogue among areas like Anthropology, Psychology and Epistemology, what do you think about the approximation common in Brazil?

**Christina Toren:** Where there is no incompatibility in founding assumptions, it is already easy enough to talk across disciplinary boundaries. The problem is, however, that founding assumptions in the work of the different disciplines may be truly incompatible. To the extent that incompatible founding assumptions are made evident and discussed, it may be possible to promote a dialogue. I think it’s a tough one though.

In respect of undergraduate education, I approve of courses that range across the human sciences. Where these course are well-designed and well-taught, they can not only give students access to ideas across disciplines and the arguments to which they give rise, but with any luck they might also promote creative attempts at conceptual rapprochements and genuinely interdisciplinary research. One last point: all our theories in anthropology are founded in a more or less explicit idea of mind and human being. For this very reason, it is important for us as anthropologists to make explicit our most fundamental ideas. Only when we do this, do we have an opportunity to find out what is incoherent, what in the end makes no sense, and what works.

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**NOTES**

[1] My degree in Psychology from University College London was obtained in 1979. I then moved to the London School of Economics for my PhD in Anthropology – beginning with what at that time was called a ‘qualifying year’ during which I attended all the undergraduate classes I could, as well as Masters and Departmental seminars; during 1980–81 I prepared for fieldwork and from 1981 to 83 I undertook my first fieldwork and graduated with a PhD in 1986. I was appointed as Lecturer at Brunel University in 1989.

[2] Geertz’s “culture concept [...] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms ...” (1973: 89)