



FESTSCHRIFT: PAUL RABINOW

If only there was a Department of Fieldwork in Philosophy

Nicolas LANGLITZ, *New School for Social Research*

Fieldwork in philosophy amounts to a second-order philosophical anthropology. It examines contemporary forms of the human by attending to lower-level concepts and practices. It departs from Michel Foucault's gray and meticulous approach to the history of the present, which understands the transformation of high-level organizing concepts such as "Man" or "the subject" through an inquiry into scientific discourses, clinical practices, disciplinary institutions, etc. However, fieldwork in philosophy doesn't approach the present by writing its history but by conducting anthropological fieldwork. This essay reconstructs Paul Rabinow's conception of fieldwork in philosophy as it inspired the author's work on the perennial philosophy of the psychedelic renaissance, a case study of neurophilosophers in a sleep laboratory, as well as research on cultural primatologists who took the Enlightenment question of human nature to the African rainforest. The essay ends with a plea for reimagining anthropology as fieldwork in philosophy.

Keywords: fieldwork, philosophy, history of the present, primatology, anthropology of science

The humanities and social sciences are organized in a pluralist manner. In these intellectual fields, certain divisive figures gain prominence by attracting particular types of readers and students while repulsing others. I think it's safe to say that, in anthropology, Paul Rabinow has served as such a polarizing point of orientation ever since he published *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco* against the opposition of his former thesis advisor Clifford Geertz (Rabinow 1977). Given that this *HAU* symposium takes the form of a Festschrift in honor of Rabinow's illustrious and at times tumultuous career, the contributions of different students provide an opportunity to think about the possibilities he opened up for the discipline at large.

For me, it was Rabinow's redefinition of anthropology as "fieldwork in philosophy" that lured me into a field of scholarship that I would not even have considered otherwise (Rabinow 2003: 83–90). I had previously studied medicine and philosophy. As an avid reader of Foucault, I considered the clinic a space for philosophical thought. But, at Free University Berlin, it seemed as if the history of medicine was the only disciplinary corner where I could pursue this kind of work. I wrote a disser-

tation on the history of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic practice but discovered that the archive wasn't for me (Langlitz 2005). While doing an internship at Palo Alto Medical Clinic in 2001, I grew tremendously excited when I discovered *Making PCR* and *French DNA* in the Stanford bookstore (Rabinow 1996, 1999). The prospect of pursuing a Foucauldian line of inquiry not in the archive but in the field led me to apply to Berkeley's PhD program in medical anthropology.

What a rude awakening it was when I got there in 2003 and it began to dawn on me that I had entered a Department of Anthropology, not a Department of Fieldwork in Philosophy. Teaching ethnographies about the Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest or the plight of street children in Brazil was hardly what I had abandoned medicine for. At the time, my interest in ethnology was infinitesimal and the moralist moment that was beginning to build up created an environment in which truth claims were often judged by their supposed political implications. To this day, I haven't quite recovered from the shock of my encounter with the knowledge culture of cultural anthropology. When the editors of this symposium invited me to contribute, their prompt put





it very aptly: Anthropology is an academic discipline whose traditional objects and modes of study have been largely abandoned, but the mechanisms of disciplinary reproduction have persisted. Hence, we are all forced to reinvent anthropology and to creatively repurpose its practices. Employing fieldwork to philosophical ends is how Rabinow met this challenge. Almost two decades later, his work has taken a turn or two, and my own thinking has also changed, but I'm still pursuing a version of what Rabinow called fieldwork in philosophy.

Three brands

Rabinow was not the first to speak of fieldwork in philosophy. To describe what he was doing in *French modern*, he borrowed the term from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who, in turn, had borrowed it from British ordinary language philosopher John Austin (Rabinow 1989: 16). Austin's approach was to examine how ordinary English people did things with words. His "fieldwork" did not amount to the ethnographic work of linguistic anthropologists though; it largely happened in the armchair with an *Oxford English Dictionary* in hand (Austin 1970). Maybe Veena Das's (1998) integration of anthropology and ordinary language philosophy could be interpreted as a late descendant that gave Austin's original fieldwork in philosophy an ethnographic form.

Bourdieu, by contrast, used the term "fieldwork in philosophy" to describe his empirical research on the social field of philosophy (although he also developed a conceptual framework of his own, for example, a theory of practice, which could and has been read by philosophers as philosophy). While Bourdieu never conducted among philosophers the kind of ethnographic work he had done in Kabylia, he transformed philosophical problems into problems of academic politics (Bourdieu 1990: 33). His book *The political ontology of Martin Heidegger* can serve as a case in point (Bourdieu 1991).

In this triad, Rabinow is the only one who actually conducted *fieldwork* in philosophy, at least some of the time (*French modern* was based on historical research). But he insisted that this fieldwork was no ethnography because its object wasn't ethnos (Rabinow 2003: 84–90). In a first approximation, I would argue that Rabinow's brand of fieldwork in philosophy amounts to a second-order philosophical anthropology, which examines contemporary forms taken by anthropos today in domains that often escape the attention of philosophy professors. At least these domains escaped the vast majority of philos-

ophy professors who may or may not have caught on to Foucault's supposed theory of the subject, but who never considered adopting Foucault's style of thought, which approached high-level organizing concepts (the subject, the human, etc.) through, say, scientific or bureaucratic lower-level concepts and practices (the discourse of clinical medicine, the dissection of corpses, or the architecture of prisons). When I sought to understand how Lacan understood the human subject in time by studying his practice of variable-length sessions, I followed in the footsteps of those rare philosophers—I'm thinking of Ian Hacking or my own professor Ulrich Johannes Schneider—who thought about the transformation of abstract categories and big ideas through historical research on tiny incidents, the birth of a new scientific concept or psychoanalytic intervention, the issuing of a new regulation, etc. In this philosophical field, Rabinow opened up the possibility of working on the present, not by writing its history, but by doing fieldwork. Importantly, this fieldwork involves but is not confined to the observation of other observers. It doesn't stop at a mere sociology of scientists and technocrats who redefine the human.

Reconstructing an ethos

Instead, Rabinow's variant of fieldwork in philosophy is a philosophical project in Foucault's sense, which asks "what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth" (Foucault 2005: 15). But it is not just a historicized form of Kantian critique that analyzes the structure of contemporary knowledge and spells out both its conditions of possibility and the limits of its validity; it also seeks to reconstruct an ethos for an intellectual life in the early twenty-first century—an ethos derived from Max Weber's conception of science as a vocation but mixed up with philosophemes adopted from an enormously wide range of not necessarily philosophical sources, ranging from the ancient Greek historian Thucydides to the contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter (Rabinow 2008, 2017).

Thus, fieldwork in philosophy is no ethnographic study of modern *ethoi*, but becomes its own kind of philosophy, although hardly in a disciplinary sense. While it remains essayistic and tentative rather than systematic and final, it returns from second-order observations of how others perceive and evaluate the ethical spaces we



inhabit to the assembly of a new optic that allows the anthropologist to perceive and evaluate these spaces differently.

And yet there was something that kept Rabinow from taking strong moral philosophical or political positions as he forged a contemporary ethos. I remember how he proudly told his PhD students about a course evaluation by an undergraduate who had greatly enjoyed his lectures but still didn't know what "Professor Rainbow" actually thought about the subject matter. This was the pride of a Weberian who had managed to restrain his moral and political passions behind the lectern. Such value freedom was never meant to remove knowledge production and distribution in the humanities from a contested ethico-political space. Instead it prepared students for not conforming with their professor's views but to develop their own.

Fieldwork in perennial philosophy

My own views of fieldwork in philosophy grew out of my dissertation "Neuropsychedelia: The revival of hallucinogen research since the Decade of the Brain." It departed from the model of a second-order philosophical anthropology. In what was then recent past, the 1990s, significant advances in the neurosciences had brought psychedelic drugs back into mainstream neuropsychopharmacology (Langlitz 2012). Foucault and Rabinow's question of what difference today made with respect to yesterday translated into what difference the revival of psychedelic research made with respect to the research that had preceded the prohibition of these substances in the late 1960s (Foucault 1997: 305).

Back from the field, I came to realize that I wasn't overly impressed by these differences: most of the research paradigms—from the induction of experimental psychoses to pharmacologically catalyzed psychotherapies of terminal cancer patients—just updated approaches that had been pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s. What struck me as more interesting was the conceptual framework of Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy, which continued to inform much contemporary research: The psychedelic experience allowed human beings to realize the supposedly transhistorical and transcultural truth that our finite minds commune with an infinite cosmic mind (Huxley [1944] 1974, [1953] 2009). This psychedelic philosophy turned out to be a rearticulation of a neo-Platonic theology, which had been passed on from the Counter-Reformationist Vatican librarian Agostino Steuco to Leib-

niz to Huxley to the Berkeley underground drug chemist Alexander Shulgin. After a self-experiment with 500 mg of mescaline, Shulgin put it this way: "Funny, I'd forgotten that what comes to you when you take a psychedelic is not always a revelation of something new and startling; you're more liable to find yourself reminded of simple things you know and forgot you knew—seeing them freshly—old, basic truths that long ago became clichés, so you stopped paying attention to them" (Shulgin and Shulgin 1991: 262).

My fieldwork in perennial philosophy reoriented me from a modernist focus on the emergence of the new to the recurrence of old and forgotten forms and philosophemes that have recently gained new significance for the present (Langlitz 2016, 2019).

Fieldwork in neurophilosophy

Since the psychedelic researchers read and exchanged ideas with empirically oriented philosophers of mind, I subsequently moved on to a more Bourdieu-like approach: making philosophy professors and their students the object of my subsequent fieldwork in neurophilosophy, mostly conducted in a Finnish dream research laboratory, run by a philosopher-neuroscientist. At the time, he hosted a group of young philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists who had received a grant to collaborate with each other.

But this work did not remain at the level of sociological observations of *Homo philosophicus*. Spending time with analytic philosophers of mind in neuroscience labs raised the question of how their interests and activities in these research facilities compared and contrasted with my own. In other words: What is the difference and what is the common ground between neurophilosophy and fieldwork in neurophilosophy? The short answer is that the philosophers sought to develop an empirically grounded conceptual framework to understand the mind while I was interested in the possibility of alternative frameworks of concepts and research practices, including alternatives to the frameworks that dominated the anthropology of science and science studies. I learned from the neurophilosophers that the mind doesn't have to be extended in an actor-network and that scientific facts are not value-laden in a way that would have allowed one to infer their political worldviews from the philosophers' identification of mind and brain (Langlitz 2015a, 2015b).



Even though this project never became the book I had originally envisioned, my fieldwork among neurophilosophers brought into focus an important aspect of my approach to anthropology. In the social studies of neuroscience, neurophilosophers were widely considered the enemy (e.g., Martin 2000). My training in continental philosophy also made me eye them with suspicion. But I decided that, instead of joining the chorus, I would advocate for the devil (Langlitz 2020b). Fieldwork can and should be transformative: as you warm up to your interlocutors and begin to understand the conundrums and difficulties they are struggling with, you begin to change your mind about things you had taken for granted. In the balkanized knowledge culture of modern universities, fieldwork in philosophy can serve as an antidote to disciplinary jingoism.

Second-order primatology

My encounters with experimenters and pure philosophical concept workers in the very labs where I did fieldwork led me to wonder what it means to do *fieldwork* in philosophy. I decided to pursue this question by making a different kind of fieldwork the object of my inquiry and began to work with cultural primatologists who conduct so-called chimpanzee ethnography in the rain forests of West and Central Africa (Langlitz 2020a). Having read a merchant's report about the apes in Loango, today a national park in Gabon, Rousseau in 1755 (1997: 205) had hoped that his fellow philosophers (but not he) would travel there to check if these "monsters" were Man in the state of nature. So I did fieldwork among field primatologists who now study Loango's chimpanzee culture. Their attempts at answering the question of what makes us human if other hominoids have culture, too, redefine anthropos today in an almost trans-historical and eventually transcultural fashion.

While I learned to appreciate the interpretive restraint of the primatologists' naturalistic observations, my own brand of fieldwork in philosophy remains closer to the traditions Rabinow has carried forward, interpretive analytics and a concern with the present that is of Foucauldian descent. In contrast to my interlocutors in cultural primatology, I was less interested in a general answer to the question of human nature than in the current natural historical moment: Why have we entered the Anthropocene rather than a Chimpocene (Langlitz 2017, 2018)? And how has the cultural primatologists'

understanding of this question been inflected by the anthropological controversy over the culture concept, which they adopted precisely when cultural *anthropologists* abandoned the category, which once defined their discipline? Such second-order primatology takes us right into the middle of anthropology's many problems.

Renovating anthropology departments

If, today, I returned from anthropology's problems to the problems that trouble philosophy departments, I'm sure it would be culture shock all over again. For those among us who are philosophically minded but don't want to spend their lives in an armchair, Rabinow's project of reconstructing a different ethos for fieldworkers in philosophy offers a way out. It also represents a counterpoint to an anthropology that currently moralizes even more zealously than when I entered graduate school. I see Rabinow's legacy in providing an alternative vision that remains a marginal possibility, but a possibility, nonetheless.

Fieldwork in philosophy grounds otherwise abstract questions of philosophic import in experience and observation. It harks back to anthropology's origins in Enlightenment philosophy, shifting the focus back from ethnos to anthropos (Rees 2018). Its goal is not to disclose the true nature of Man, but to explore the indeterminate forms that human (and hominoid) life is taking as we speak.

Fieldwork in philosophy also harks back to the Ancient Greek origins of philosophy itself, which did not begin as an academic discipline but as a family of new ways of life (Hadot 2002). Most prominently the philosophical life was exemplified by a man accused of being a teacher of evil to the Athenian youth because he had made a habit of questioning common belief and popular opinion (Plato 2005). As a pedagogic practice, a philosophically oriented anthropology should domesticate such gadflies.

This reference to ancient philosophy counterbalances the modernist obsession with the new, especially in anthropological engagements with the sciences. My foray into the perennial philosophy of contemporary psychedelia sensitized me to the fact that the polytemporality of Rabinow's anthropology of the contemporary has never been confined to the recent past and the near future. Its references have often reached back all the way to Ancient Greece or Rome. From our cultural



archive, he retrieved things we know and forgot we knew, such as Plato's conception of *thumós*, which Rabinow (2008: 90–98) found rearticulated in the controversy over the Human Genome Project and quickly made part of his own ethical toolbox. His fieldwork in philosophy is no anthropology of emergence that fetishizes novelty and thereby replicates the temporal structure of the natural sciences, which rarely cite texts older than fifty years. Classics like Nietzsche and Weber, which Rabinow read and reread for decades, have shaped the humanist ethos with which he approached the biosciences. Allegiance to these often long-dead authors whom he accompanied and opposition to those with whom he parted company shaped the spirited tone of his books.

Amid anthropology's current problems, the embrace of Max Weber's value freedom marked Rabinow's exceptional and rather untimely aspiration of staying clear of moral condemnation and political activism. At the end of the day, his fieldwork in philosophy could also be understood as a set of spiritual exercises to overcome the resentment that has informed so much anthropology as cultural critique. Resentment is a human problem par excellence, but it is especially a problem for humans today, caught up as they are in filter bubbles and partisan forms of sociality. As anthropology departments become more and more eager to engage with urgent moral problems, they also become less hospitable to the philosophical temperament of people who take their time, who show themselves to be impious, and who seek to remain free by nature of their otherworldliness (Critchley 2010; Langlitz 2020b). Part of me is still looking for a Department of Fieldwork in Philosophy. But, unless we try to build an intellectual life outside of the university, anthropology departments are all we've got. So we better preserve and restore some pluralism within. The defense and creation of spaces for fieldwork in philosophy should be one goal in the renovation of our institutions.

References

- Austin, John. 1970. "A plea for excuses." In *Philosophical Papers*, edited by J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 175–204. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. "Fieldwork in philosophy." In *In other words. Essays towards a reflexive sociology*, 3–33. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 1991. *The political ontology of Martin Heidegger*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Critchley, Simon. 2010. "What is a philosopher?" *The New York Times*, May 16, 2010. <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/what-is-a-philosopher/?pagemode=print>.
- Das, Veena. 1998. "Wittgenstein and anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 171–95.
- Foucault, Michel. 1997. "What is Enlightenment?" In *Ethics. Subjectivity and truth. Essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow, 303–19. New York: The New Press.
- . 2005. *The hermeneutics of the subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hadot, Pierre. 2002. *What is ancient philosophy?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Huxley, Aldous. (1944) 1974. *The perennial philosophy*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- . (1953) 2009. *The doors of perception & Heaven and hell*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Langlitz, Nicolas. 2005. *Die Zeit der Psychoanalyse: Lacan und das Problem der Sitzungsdauer*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- . 2012. *Neuropsychedelica: The revival of hallucinogen research since the Decade of the Brain*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2015a. "On a not so chance encounter between neurophilosophy and science studies in a sleep laboratory." *History of the Human Sciences* 28 (4): 3–24.
- . 2015b. "Vatted dreams: Neurophilosophy and the politics of phenomenal internalism." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21 (4): 739–57.
- . 2016. "Is there a place for psychedelics in philosophy? Fieldwork in neuro- and perennial philosophy." *Common Knowledge* 22 (3): 373–84.
- . 2017. "Primatology of science: On the birth of Actor-Network Theory from baboon field observations." *Theory, Culture & Society* 36 (1): 83–105.
- . 2018. "Salvage and self-loathing: Cultural primatology and the spiritual malaise of the Anthropocene." *Anthropology Today* 34 (6): 16–20.
- . 2019. "Psychedelic platitudes: Remembering an anthropology of the perennial." *Curare* 42 (1–2): 35–37.
- . 2020a. *Chimpanzee culture wars: Rethinking human nature alongside Japanese, European, and American cultural primatologists*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



- . 2020b. “Devil’s advocate: Sketch of an amoral anthropology.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10 (3): 989–1004.
- Martin, Emily. 2000. “Mind-body problems.” *American Ethnologist* 27 (3): 569–90.
- Plato. 2005. “The apology.” In *Euthyphro · Apology · Crito · Phaedo · Phaedrus*. Translated by Harold North Fowler, 61–146. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rabinow, Paul. 1977. *Reflections on fieldwork in Morocco*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1989. *French modern: Norms and forms of the social environment*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1996. *Making PCR: A story of biotechnology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1999. *French DNA: Trouble in purgatory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 2003. *Anthropos today: Reflections on modern equipment*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2008. *Marking time: On the anthropology of the contemporary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2017. *Unconsolable contemporary: Observing Gerhard Richter*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rees, Tobias. 2018. *After ethnos*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1997. *“The discourses” and Other early political writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shulgin, Alexander, and Ann Shulgin. 1991. *PIHKAL: A chemical love story*. Berkeley: Transform Press.

Nicolas LANGLITZ is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at The New School for Social Research in New York. He is the author of *Chimpanzee culture wars: Rethinking human nature alongside Japanese, European, and American cultural primatologists* (Princeton University Press, 2020), *Neuropsychedelia: The revival of hallucinogen research since the decade of the brain* (University of California Press, 2012), and *Die Zeit der Psychoanalyse: Lacan und das Problem der Sitzungsdauer* (Suhrkamp, 2005). At present, he studies behavioral sciences that examine moral behavior and is working on a book of microessays and aphorisms on the psychedelic experience.

Nicolas Langlitz
langlitn@newschool.edu

