

Review of “Conversations with Tim Ingold” – The first book published by Scottish Universities Press

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Introduction

This article is a personal perspective on reading the book. I knew little of the authors or the topic before it was submitted.

The book aims to provide an overview of the contributions, influences, and criticisms of the work of the anthropologist Tim Ingold. It is presented as a series of conversations.

The authors of the book all have career histories in academic anthropology.

I decided to read the book because I had spent time supporting the Scottish Universities Press and the book. Here I pick out just a few of my observations.

Having read the book, I would say it is accessible to all - academics, students, and members of the public. I did need to look up a few concepts, sometimes several times, and was left wondering if I needed to delve further to understand some of the ideas more fully.

I expected to be reading something dry and academic, and it was not at all that.

The book can be downloaded for free, see reference list for hyperlink.

I read a paper copy of the book.

I have written my comments as they occurred to me by chapter but note that many of the themes naturally recur across several chapters.

In the introduction it is claimed that Tim “has not only advanced thinking and research within the discipline of anthropology but also made significant contributions to a wide range of debates in both the arts and humanities and the natural sciences.” (Ingold et al 2024, 1). Whilst I cannot comment on the contributions the book draws out plenty of thought-provoking ideas that touch on many aspects of life.

I love to join things up so it resonates with me that Tim has a clear message that topics are not silos, and his work can impact on many areas and thought processes. I have always been an advocate of ‘who is interested in this’ rather than this is for specific types of people to be involved in.

Tim is not afraid to make bold statements and criticisms.

I learned a lot about anthropology and other labelled specialisms too.

Conversation One: Life and career

From this I learned that Tim was different to me in that he went to a private school and could be considered upper middle class. This made me consider class again as I have been referred to as having a middle-class upbringing. We owned our house, had a phone, a car, and regular hot meals but there were no private schools or cello lessons. This then made me think of ‘Normal People’ (Rooney 2018) which had a group of well-off students at its centre with another central character who was made out to be comparatively poor. However, this student had a car. I cannot imagine ever affording a car when I was a student. Other students got grants when I was at university, but I did not. I had very few material things. I never felt poor. So, my point here is that it made me think about relative ‘luck’ and that life is unfair in terms of wealth be that financial or health. So many people have so much less.

Tim was also bullied and had his own insecurities which are universal themes across all parts of society.

It is in this chapter that Tim mentions his concern that too much focus is now put on training for fieldwork much of which may not be directly useful to the students. This made me ponder how to identify the right training at the right time.

It was good to read the reminders that we should learn from people and education is not just about qualifications but about how the actual deeper experience and skills taken from the course or research impact your life.

Oh yes - and how you used to be expected to sit in a smoke-filled room and discuss work.

Conversation Two: Anthropology, ethnography, education and the University

It was enjoyable to read about actually listening to people and working with them, rather than treating them as a source of data. A very pertinent point in today's world that touts good practice in research culture and the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance (2020).

Again, the artificialness of classifications is mentioned, and we are reminded that topics and people do not belong in boxes with set labels. Tim clearly has high regard for experts in other disciplines who have influenced him.

I laughed at the mention of pompous labels for research techniques such as "snowball technique" (Ingold et al 2024, 85) as a description on following up leads from others.

It was refreshing to be reminded of the importance of recording comprehensive fieldnotes to aid your memory later.

Conversation Three: Environment, perception and skill

Here Tim talks about "poetics" – making artefacts or knowledge from our involvement with the world, and that science is often viewed as independent of the habitat. I do not know why this reminds me of why I liked physics better than maths at school – because the former was applied and felt more real and contextual to me.

As in other parts of the book he notes his distaste for academic snobbery that is exclusive. I am glad to learn that the difference between mud and materiality of mud is.... clear as mud.

The discussion about material in context was interesting...." wool has different characteristics on the back of sheep than it does in a piece of felt, or woven blanket" (Ingold et al 2024, 121)

He says he learned a lot from reading early Karl Marx work that encouraged him to think more about Marx's work. I will give it a go to see if I find something inspiring in there.

Conversation Four: Animals, lines and imagination

This was the most difficult chapter for me to relate to. I see the basic concepts and do not argue with them as one way of describing relationships with animals and the environment.

I liked the idea of pictures in caves not really being pictures since such a description is relatively recent. Instead, Tim suggested thinking of wider 'communications' encompassing all sorts of notation.

Also of interest is how Tim differentiates between correspondence, conversation, interaction and uses a musical fugue as an example of correspondence.

Sadly, we did not manage to read the book without encountering something about the Research Excellence Framework (Ingold et al 2024, 170) though I am pleased for Tim that he does not need to try to fit the requirements of this now.

Tim's ideas of generations being more like intertwined strands of a rope than distinct divisions are interesting and so it will be interesting to see if his next book on this topic is widely readable.

Conversation Five: Looking back and forward

Here the conversation returns passionately to Tim's view of anthropology as a discipline "in-between all the other disciplines" (Ingold et al 2024, 177) enthusing that this allows a certain freedom to work with different people and disciplines.

I love how Tim describes that "The purpose of the lecture is not to transmit information, but to get students excited about the subject." (Ingold et al 2024, 182)

Conclusion

This book is very uplifting, and I credit it for reducing my stress when I could not sleep in the middle of the night. I was drawn into a world of possibilities and straight talk. It enthused me with fresh views and made me laugh and smile. I could draw on similar examples from my own life as a fellow drifter.

A great insight into the world of anthropology and lessons learned from Tim's career that I think anyone can read and enjoy.

Data availability statement

This is a book review article with no supporting data to make available.

Competing Interests

VM is a member of the Scottish Universities Press Management Board.

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References

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