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Anthropology Book Forum

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The Subtle Arts of Ethnography and Lineology

Review by Sideeq Mohammed & Felicity Heathcote-Márcz

The Life of Lines

by Tim Ingold

Routledge, 2015

Introduction

This review aims to offer readers a concise yet (hopefully) robust review of Tim Ingold's latest work, *The Life of Lines*. Readers familiar with Ingold's work will remember his controversial (but arguably misunderstood) definition of anthropology as "philosophy with people in" (1992, p.696), as well as his vehement opposition to the synonymy of ethnography and anthropological work (Ingold, 2014). Considering this position, it is possible to read *The Life of Lines* as a well written anthropological treatise - one attentive to the culture and mores of a global community or collective "we" (as opposed to a particular people, time and place; the conventional objects of ethnographic investigation) - which weaves together a cross-disciplinary set of themes around the question of the line. There is, however, another dimension to this argument in which it would be an injustice to depict *The Life of Lines* as anything other than an *ethnographic* monograph. Such a definition of "ethnographic", however, is heterogeneous to the mainstream images of qualitative researchers with pragmatist principles investigating the realities of how things work in everyday organizations (Watson, 2011, 2012). Indeed, it is one which tries even contemporary definitions of "the field" within anthropology (Amit, 2000) pursuing "interlocutors" through the worlds of art, literature, philosophy, meteorology, cartography, Ingold's childhood memories, and conversations with several major works of anthropological canon.

In many ways then, *The Life of Lines* may be seen as the product of an entire life subjected to the

“retrospective judgement” which, for Ingold (2014), defines “ethnographicness”. As he astutely puts it: “to lead a life is to lay down a line” (2015, p.118). A life which follows and creates lines, that is, and Ingold’s is undoubtedly a life that is religiously observant to the lines that have become his anthropology and ethnography. His ethnography of lines is one which is long-term, in-depth, committed, attentive, complex, and ‘wanders’ in interesting ways. Few texts which we might more commonly call ethnographic provide us with such conceptually nuanced glimpses into the thought processes, understandings and practices of the ethnographer. It would also be an error to describe this work as merely theoretical, for the classificatory schema of “theory” does not adequately depict that Ingold is out for a walk among the thoughts of the world; that he is tying a series of richly complex conceptual knots. The lines of thought which constitute *The Life of Lines* interweave and knot together throughout Ingold’s corpus, reaching even to his earliest works. Indeed, this is perhaps what Ingold can offer to scholars in Organization Studies whose research ventures into the ethnographic: the practice of *weaving*, creating an intricately complex meshwork of concepts out of “the field”. In this sense, it may be that a new discipline is needed to describe these efforts, that weave in-between ethnography and so many other disciplines - what Ingold himself calls a *lineology* - a discipline whose principles this review will attempt to espouse. While Ingold, the lineologist, may be prone to an almost religious devotion to the tracking of lines, we shall argue that there is much that his work can teach us in terms of reconciling the questions surrounding an engagement with “theory” and, more broadly speaking, ethnographic practice.

On the Meshwork

To begin simply, Ingold’s definition of the line is kept unsurprisingly general, delineated in the initial statements of *Lines: A Brief History* as merely that which unifies “walking, weaving, observing, singing, storytelling, drawing and writing” (Ingold, 2007. p.1). In a broader context, the line (or in the least the relation which the line implies) is perhaps the smallest anthropological unit of measure, for lines are not about fixity, singularity and uniqueness but about connection, linkage and association; those basic building blocks of culture and the social with which the anthropologist concerns herself. Ingold himself underscores this in *The Life of Lines* noting the centrality of “the entwining of lines” (p.4) to the social fabric. One may thus be tempted to dismiss Ingold as another thinker of the globalized, network society but he defies the ubiquity of the “network” in our thinking by turning to Lefebvre (Ingold, 2007. p.81) and the concept of the “meshwork”: “a dense tangle of trails” (2015, p.82) which are “interwoven” (2011, p.63) rather than “interconnected”. If one were to try to delineate

the tenets and principles of lineology, one would necessarily have to begin with the idea of developing a meshwork. *The Life of Lines* develops the concept of the “meshwork” itself (previously developed by others such as De Landa, 1995) through the language of “knotting”. This conceptualisation first emerges for Ingold in *Looking for Lines in Nature* (2012), via the work of the architect, Lars Spuybroek. While a network will have nodes and communicate point to point, a meshwork will have knots or tangles where the lines of slugs, or the trails of Australian Aboriginal people, or concepts, will be drawn close together and allowed to resound with each other.

Following this imaginary, Part I of *The Life of Lines* interlaces the concepts of blobs with images of octopuses and anemones from Marcel Mauss, with questions of joining and carpentry, with the work of Immanuel Kant and the grounds of perception, and with Ingold’s previous work on walking (see Ingold and Vergunst, 2008). It is worth noting, however, that for Ingold this weaving practice always produces a number of concepts which emerge as “loose ends”, as Spuybroek might term them, while others are knotted together with different concepts, continuing to evolve as a part of the weaving. Indeed, some of the aforementioned concepts become such “loose ends” in *The Life of Lines*, while others continue to occur throughout the text. Such loose ends are inevitably a part of a meshwork and indeed, a life (see Ingold, 2012). What we might learn from this is perhaps that these diverse lines of thought can be placed into correspondence with one another, if only to see what they produce. That is, rather than merely borrowing and applying concepts from the world of philosophy, Ingold is actively engaged in creating his own through the interweaving of a meshwork of different sources. Though this is not altogether a novel practice, Organization Studies has long expressed difficulty at navigating the many answers to the question of what to do with philosophy (Jones and ten Bos, 2007), and more mainstream approaches appear to struggle around more basic questions of theory/practice and the role of the “theorizer” (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2013). It may be that there is a method to the weaving of the meshwork of *The Life of Lines* and the consequent creation of concepts “from the field” that Ingold can offer to aid us in understanding broader debates around the role of “theory” in driving ethnographic research (see Wilson and Chaddha, 2009).

On Discipline

Ingold’s weaving practices can also be seen in the disciplinary irreverence of his more recent works and this may meaningfully be read as the second tenet of lineology. Ingold’s own history of attempting to articulate anthropology with and through other disciplines, culminates in *The Life of Lines* with his own

correspondence of multi-disciplinary lines of thinking, following lines from his own corpus as well as from art, architecture, literature, meteorology and philosophy. However, Ingold's pursuit of a concept goes beyond this, tracking it over long periods of time and drawing our focus to its process - to the *in-between* (that we will discuss in our next section).

This cross-disciplinarity is especially observable in Part II of *The Life of Lines*: "Weathering" (p.51). Taking the example of the storm, we might trace the line of thought beyond Part II of *The Life of Lines* to Ingold's early studies of Finnish Lapland where, as he notes, he would often include in his field-notes descriptions of the weather (p.69-70). Ingold's (2005) work on visual perception similarly begins with an anecdote about the experience of standing on a Scottish shoreline with a colleague and watching a storm materialize as a presence in the sky, the "eye" of the storm leading Ingold into a protracted discussion of vision and light via Merleau-Ponty and Gibson. This discussion of the perception of the weather is continued via a similar reminiscence in 2011's *Being Alive* where Ingold takes a class of students to the shore, observing a "world without objects" (p.131) amidst the weather-world of the fluctuating and impossible to define boundaries between sky and ocean. The line of thought continues to Ingold's (2012) paper which speaks of the storm as pure movement, as other than a bounded, contained entity spiralling across the sky, drawing analogies between it and the movement of slugs on the driveway. The thought itself is thus always in the middle of becoming, always 'a relation of correspondence between lines' (p.56).

In *The Life of Lines*, Ingold asks his readers to weather with him, as he returns to the discussion of storms and the atmosphere in order to apply a "blending of the cosmic with the affective" (2015. p.92) in their thinking. In the space of a few short chapters Ingold elaborates from the whirling of the storm (2015. p.54-5), connecting to his previous work on walking and the difficulty drawing boundary lines around trees (see Ingold, 2010) as well as, in keeping with his attention to the sensual, developing the aforementioned work on visual perception through discussions of van Gogh's *A Starry Night* (p.94), Taussig's (2009) comments on colour in relation to affect (p.103) and sonority in relation to Bach's third suite for unaccompanied cello (p.109). In each of these cases, what is crucial is that the lines of thought which constitute this meshwork are pursued across time, spaces, and the boundaries of disciplines - from anthropology, to meteorology, to art criticism, to music theory. It may indeed be argued that all ethnography is interdisciplinary - following any issues that arise from encounters in the field as matters of concern. Yet Ingold's contribution in *The Life of Lines*, in introducing the lineologist (who carefully and intricately knits a meshwork of concepts across many so called disciplines, spaces

and points of reference) provides us with a useful and unique reminder of the possibilities weaving ideas across and beyond all sorts of boundaries may realise.

On the In-between

This question of the middle or, more accurately, the in-between is the final major preoccupation for the lineologist. Ingold's attention to the "meshwork" rather than the "network", and the "knot" rather than the "chain", are his attempts to think differently about relations of 'the social' and to re-imagine a broad praxis of life's activities - from building to standing upon the ground, as something else in the middle. Part III of *The Life of Lines* sees Ingold also replacing the noun "human" with the verb "Humaning", perhaps the most telling demonstration in the book of the conceptual centrality of the in-between for his own conception of what it means to carry out research anthropologically. This is an attention to that which is without fixity, without origin or destination. Whether this stems from broader preoccupations around the in-between (and related issues like liminality), or it results from the affinity which *The Life of Lines* demonstrates for the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, or whether the question of the in-between emerges spontaneously from the meshwork of the text, are questions only for speculation. However, in reflecting on these comments from *A Thousand Plateaus*:

"A line of becoming has only a middle. [...] A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border or line of flight or descent running perpendicular to both."

(Deleuze and Guattari, 2005. p.293)

The line of thought that is being developed becomes clear, particularly in the context of the parable of the river and the ferryman (p.150-151) which Ingold invokes. While the ferryman is between when he is at the midpoint *between* the two known and identifiable banks, the river flows in-between the banks to and from the unknown and the untraceable. In short, the river becomes.

We can see an attention to the in-between demonstrated in Ingold's previous work, particularly on walking and travel. In conjunction with Jo Vergunst (2008), Ingold describes the initial steps of walking on a journey as those taken with neither clear comprehension of bearing and direction, nor clear understanding when the journey began and will end. This is placed in terms of the between and the in-between in Ingold's (2007) differentiation of travelling and wayfaring, the former moving between the fixed points of a network and the latter moving in-between, that is, without definitive purpose, start or end point. Similar to that of the lineologist, the life of the wayfarer and the line his movement draws is,

read via the logic of the artist Paul Klee, a line out for a walk, a line in-between.

In Part III of *The Life of Lines* Ingold returns to the wayfarer and walking in-between, this time in the context of the maze and the labyrinth, the former entrapping the fixed point-to-point movements of a “navigator” with dead-ends while the wayfarer tracks uncharted trails within the labyrinth, always in a middle. Ingold continues by invoking Jan Masschelein’s words to describe the act of walking in relation to education (p.135). We might elaborate these comments to say that, much like the wayfarer wandering the labyrinth, the lineologist learns with no final point of arrival, research goals or firm standpoint. In irreverently following her different lines with expressions and anecdotes from various disciplines, the life of the lineologist becomes one which is fundamentally out-of-position (p.135). The leading of life Ingold conceives of as at once ‘not yet’ and ‘already there’ (p.118), is both this in-between-ness and what is meant by his serious invitation to ‘lay down a line’ (p.118). It is the not being or going anywhere mapped out, that ties Ingold’s concept of correspondence to the middle - where proliferating lines of concepts, thinkers and histories meet, to ‘stretch the fabric of time’ from imagination and memories (p.157), and to walking ‘paths of observation’ that Ingold invokes from James Gibson’s work. Rather, the correspondence of lines, most crucially for Ingold, provides education *in a life*.

To understand this we address ourselves to the senses and their role in ethnographic experience, as these provide a foundation for Ingold in his discussion of the ‘in-between’. Air, light, sound and touch all fall into this ontology for Ingold, as senses are evoked as the ruffling of surfaces (p.150) of all kinds in the haptic modes of contact of the in-between. We might see this sensuality in the way Ingold (2013) attends to the reading practices of eleventh century monks which, he suggests, required no spaces *between words*, hence text was made up of nothing but a middle, and was sensorially experienced, or “read out, following the line of letters” (Ingold, 2013. p.741) by both touching and speaking them. This corporeality, the embodied experience of following a line is undoubtedly a part of “participant observation”; itself, as defined by Ingold, a practice of correspondence (p.157). However, rather than using this to produce retrospective accounts as an ethnographer would, it would seem that the lineologist must bodily walk with others in the sense of “an ongoing exploration of what the possibilities and potentials of a life might be!” (p.157), a learning without end or aim.

Conclusion

Through developing a conceptual meshwork, practicing disciplinary irreverence via every knot of thought he ties and being committed to the in-between, it seems clear that Ingold and *The Life of Lines* succeed in both drawing out and articulating a means of corresponding to the world that we might uniquely call lineology. We venture that lineology might indeed be a way of developing future academic praxis, particularly through the weaving which might take us beyond the divisions of disciplines and into studies of the weather, walking, the work of Gilles Deleuze or ontologies concerned with “humanifying” rather than the human (and perhaps what remains for future research is to place the conversations of *The Life of Lines* into the broader context of the ontological turn). While we have tried to draw out themes which relate to lines from Ingold’s oeuvre and are thereby perhaps guilty of exaggerating them, Ingold’s life of lines, over a decade of publication across multiple books and papers which clearly follows little other than the line, seems to present as a kind of obsession, an almost religious faith in the ‘correspondence of lines’ and the promise that they hold for rethinking anthropology. One can only wonder what Ingold’s ethnography of the line, his lineology, might be able to contribute to Organization Studies. An interest in philosophy and a more robust engagement with its concepts? A reopening of questions around the ends of “organizational ethnography” or the “autoethnographic” though its provocation? Perhaps, simply, helping us catch up to shifting definitions of “the field” or the debates around “the ontological turn”? Rather than dismissing this work as abstract or disconnected, perhaps there is space within the current intellectual climate to appreciate this kind of dedication to finding and following lines. To return once more to Ingold’s (2014) comments, perhaps what we need is not merely to say “that’s enough about ethnography”, but the courage to speak in support of *lineology: a life of lines*.

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Felicity Heathcote-Márcz is a doctoral researcher at Alliance Manchester Business School. Her PhD “Managing the Cyborg” follows an ethnography of the strategic Technology Centre of a global bank, and “ethnographic peeking” of a unique technology-arts organisation in the North of England. Felicity is a member of the Manchester Ethnography Network.

Sideeq Mohammed is a doctoral researcher at Alliance Manchester Business School. His PhD project is an ethnography of one of the largest shopping centres in the UK which attempts to develop a research method out of the works of philosopher, Gilles Deleuze. Sideeq is a member of the Manchester Ethnography Network.



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