In the introduction to this collection, I aim to outline the debate sparked by Tim Ingold (2014) on the relation between ethnography and theory. I outline a few methodological principles that ground the idea of “ethnographic theory” by distinguishing it from some cognate approaches, including the so-called “ontological turn” and Ingold’s idea of correspondence. Rather than pursuing an isomorphism between thing and concept, between happenstances and their description, I argue that ethnographic theory rather aims to reach “satisfactory” (cf. Wittgenstein [1953] 2009) and “felicitous” (Austin 1975) effects, which account for the productive uncertainty at the core of human sociality and the anticipatory, subjunctive, and metapragmatic dimensions of any interaction.

Keywords: ethnography, theory, pragmatics, ethnographic theory, imagination, uncertainty

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by Hobsbawm and Ranger. However, one would only need to remember the title—rather than the content—to cite and support a humbug argument that the concept “culture” is predicated on fantasy, creativity, and fabrication. We could easily recall other examples of title-arguments, almost purportedly relying on an effect of counterintuitiveness to achieve spectacular effects of memorability: “Thinking through things”; “Death without weeping”; “The soul's body.” One of the most downloaded titles in the history of this journal, Tim Ingold’s “That’s enough about ethnography!” (2014), shares a similar fate with Roy Wagner’s and other equivocal bestsellers. Originally part of a special section edited by Bob W. White and Kiven Strohm, titled “How does anthropology know?” (2014), Ingold’s manifesto was my perfect gambit. No other journal, I pondered back then, would ever publish a no-holds-barred critique of its own raison d’être. The gambit proved to be highly rewarding: the article promptly became the most downloaded piece of the year and it was flattering to notice that a top-tier disciplinary journal, Cultural Anthropology, gathered a collection of pieces and positions around it in 2016.

It is, however, unfortunate that cursory readers may have held Ingold responsible for casting aspersion on the practice of ethnography per se, or that he would regard ethnography as irrelevant to the enterprise called anthropology. Admittedly, Ingold’s Hau article is rather a sort of companion piece to his 2008 Radcliffe-Brown lecture, “Anthropology is not ethnography,” which features a more analytically sound title and nuanced presentation of the relationship between ethnography and theory. That is the relationship at stake. Though some sophisticated musings on Ingold’s Hau article followed (e.g., Shryock 2016), I noticed the article’s pompous title elicited two main caricaturist readings:

1) Ingold was genuinely against ethnography and his position was associated to his meme, “anthropology is philosophy with people in it.” This group denounced the demise of ethnography or its subsumption to cosmo-philosophies or geontologies (Povinelli 2016), an idealistic move that found its symbolic nadir in the “ontological” elaboration of Ingold’s meme: “What is at stake are the ideas, not the people who might ‘hold’ them. So if . . . anthropology is philosophy with people in it, I’d say [Ingold] is right, but only without the people” (Holbraad in Carrithers et al. 2010: 185).

2) Ingold was genuinely right in challenging the primacy of ethnography and the contention of an identity between empirical experience and analysis, that is, anthropology should be a mirror-image of ethnography (cf. Heywood, forthcoming).

Briefly, Ingold’s position in his Radcliffe-Brown lecture (and in subsequent work) revolves around the refusal of the classic distinction in philosophy of science between idiographic and nomothetic sciences. At the risk of producing another caricature, for reasons of space I will only say that where idiographic method focuses on documenting and describing particular cases, the nomothetic collects and compares these cases to produce general laws and causal regularities (Ingold, this issue). Or to put it with Isaiah Berlin’s animal metaphor, where idiographic foxes would describe one single thing well, nomothetic thinkers would know many things and draw their wit on the comparative knowledge. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, Ingold argued, clearly moved beyond this model. At first, his approach seemed
nomothetic (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 2), a form of comparative sociology aimed to produce acceptable generalization, but the ground of comparison where not societies conceived as entities or machines (as Edmund Leach would put it) but life-processes. The real methodological innovation of Radcliffe-Brown was to conceive anthropology as a process-oriented discipline not dealing with machines or organs but forms of life. Along similar lines, Maurice Bloch (2000) once argued that ethnographies deal with fixed forms and pretend to describe dynamic developments with static reductions: they are snapshots of ongoing processes. Contrary to the documentary role of the ethnographer, the anthropologist cannot take snapshots of people while at the same time being engaged with them.

In Ingold’s intimation, ethnography “means writing about the people” (2014: 385) or “practice of description” (390): the elaboration of the term does not move beyond these documentary connotations. By doing so, Ingold is setting up quite the straw man in an attempt “to purify” ethnography, to use Bruno Latour’s term. That observation is inseparable from theory is certainly not an original thought. When called to provide a definition of theory and ethnography, hardly anyone of the debaters would treat “ethnography” as mere empirical “method,” or pure objectifying or documentary practice, or support the argument that a nontheoretical ethnography can ever exist. As Laura Nader puts it in the inaugural issue of Hau, “ethnography is never a description but a theory of describing” (2011: 211).

Rather, Ingold’s key move concerns the notion of correspondence between the anthropologist’s perception and action and his informants, “much as melodic lines are coupled in a musical counterpoint” (2014: 389). The notes of Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty on intersubjectivity resonate in this allegro ma non troppo. But Ingold’s ultimate craft is a great symphony of reunification. Ultimately, one needs to dispose of the difference between description and theory, between anthropology and ethnography. One is always involved. Doing is thinking, being is becoming, and ethnographic theory is tautological since a) ethnography is not a method, and b) one does not do anthropological theory of people but only with people. Participant observation cannot be an observation because one is always engaged: there is no separate “field” out there. There is no separation between observation, description, and comparison. Anthropological writing should not be an art of description but can only be a practice of non-corrective description, a description that has broken away from mere observation (Ingold 2008: 88). Indeed, it is the issue of correspondence between theory and ethnography the sensitive nerve that Ingold’s article exposed.

This leaves us with different conundrums: a) how does a scholar do anthropology of societies he or she cannot be with, like ancient societies or societies represented in texts?; b) what is the epistemological status of imagination, essential to Ingold’s model?; c) how is such anthropological Dasein played out in situations where the uncertainty and fragility of the interactions between anthropologist and “the people” give rise to misunderstandings, paradoxes, and unsettling relations? What are the remainders and refusals produced during the noncorrespondent description?

I cannot exhaust these issues in this short introduction. I would rather displace a coherent methodological answer to the strategy employed by Marshall Sahlins (1999) a while ago when talking about culture. By saying a number of things about an umbrella concept, perhaps two or three will be right.
One of the main points raised by the audience at the SOAS debate was whether ethnography’s sanctity should be preserved. Signe Howell (this issue) rightly pointed out that a host of scholars from humanities and social sciences now claim to use “ethnographic methods” in grant applications for strategic reasons. Howell argues that “ethnography” requires a different level of involvement and in-depth engagement, which should never be given up to armchair anthropology. This leads, however, to a poignant question: how can anthropology account for phenomena that limit our capacity of involvement yet require analytical or public response from our discipline, such as social media, fake news, or Trump’s utterances (Asa Thomas, pers. comm.), to name just a few. I personally encountered this conundrum when trying to study Tibetan self-immolations in regions where access is tightly controlled and foreigners (and fieldwork) are banned.

Daniel Miller (this issue) provides an intriguing response to this question: for him, no one can “just” live on the social media, but in order to understand why people post on social media we must work offline and adopt a holistic perspective on social life. Ethnography is a total social fact that deals with the totality of human creativity in everyday life; it is that humbling experience that allows us to not fetishize self-absorbing “theoretical issues” or “news” without an immersion of the everyday life connected to them. In sum, if I read Miller correctly, one cannot pursue ethnography of social media per se without a concrete and humbling personal exposure to the (regional) issues under scrutiny. An open question remains whether a previous experience in a field site can constitute a sort of mana-capital of knowledge and provide that sort of intimacy with the field, which can be deployed later in life while sitting in an armchair or strolling through a park or reflecting on walks and lines.

**Ethnographic Theory**

For David Graeber and me, ethnographic theory began as critique of anthropological knowledge, a position that was largely made explicit in the inaugural Foreword of this journal. We never argued that we were inventing anything novel, groundbreaking, or mind-boggling. On the contrary, the *Hau* project of ethnographic theory has been fairly traditionalist, propounding an awareness of the intellectual history of our discipline in order to avoid the recurrent “reinventions of the wheel,” marking some infamous disciplinary cutting-edges—sharpened by fashionable neologisms and marketable astonishments—generated by the ones keen to play the philosophers. We clearly expressed our interest in keywords, concepts, and the floating signifiers of anthropology (taboo, mana, hau, potlatch). However, our interest was not limited to eventful or “controlled equivocations” (Viveiros de Castro 2004) but the proliferation and historical transmissions of the misunderstandings rising in everyday interactional confusions or contradictions of common expectations, the paradoxes of everyday life, and communication. “We see ethnography as a pragmatic inquiry into conceptual disjunctures,” we wrote (da Col and Graeber 2011: vii). It is crucial to summon up that Roy Wagner’s (1975) notion of “misunderstanding” that Eduardo Viveiros de Castro employs to construct his theory of “equivocation” was influenced by Gregory Bateson’s “double-bind”—that
Two or three things I know about Ethnographic Theory

is, the contemporary coexistence and condensation of two contradictory orders or statements about the world. Let me clarify further the importance of the “pragmatic” aspect in our definition of “ethnography.” If we assume that social life or “engagement” is predicated on the trust of others and that others will participate cooperatively in our lives, it follows that the anticipation of the action of the others requires the ability to cognitively model the interdependence of one’s own and others’ behavior, a form of social contingency and recursive dependence of our actions on the imagination of authenticity of other people’s actions. From this perspective, the attunement and correspondence propounded by Ingold can only be an emergent property of the interactional dynamics in which agents are necessarily caught. At stake in this process is the role of anticipatory cognition and imagination. Through their imagination and capacity to generate subjunctive frames of action, humans have the capability of questioning the flow of interaction and opening horizons or domains that are grounded on certain hypothetical, “as-if” qualities (cf. Seligman et al. 2008). “Participant observation” thus entails not just an intersubjective correspondence but a metacommunicative signal warning the agent or participants about the nature of their action, such as the famous Batesonian frame (“this is a play”) that produces an imaginative space where social rules, truth, and authenticity have a different bearing. This necessity to incorporate both an anticipatory (where actors must pro-act based on the anticipations of the others’ actions) and metapragmatic dimension (where the social actors reflect on the reasons of their own action and the possibility that their interlocutor may misunderstand them) is where ethnographic theory differs from other “evenemental” theoretical approaches where situations are bracketed out, described in vague or misleading terms, and occasional or ritual statements are erected to “cosmologies” and couched in the idiom of reported belief, and we are never told who said what, when, and in which context a certain statement is generative of a wider cultural insight. The larger implication of this approach, which has been advocated by Luc Boltanski (2011) and pursued by a group of young French anthropologists (cf. Berthomé, Bonhomme, and Delaplace 2012), is the study of the productivity of uncertainty at the heart of social life, where uncertainty locally emerges as an “unshared commitment” (contra Tomasello 2009) and a human non-correspondence (contra Ingold 2014), often creating paradoxes, confusions, and inescapable situations that the actors must confront and resolve and makes certain representations or “ontologies” transmissible.

The felicitous intelligibility

It is puzzling that in his attack on the concept animating this journal, Ingold (2014) refrains from recalling that the first reference to the idea of “ethnographic theory” is found in volume two of Malinowski’s Coral gardens and their magic: “An ethnographic theory of language and some practical corollaries” (Part IV) and “An ethnographic theory of the magical word” (Part VI). Here, Malinowski makes clear that the study of language cannot be separated from practices, actions, and habits often oblivious to the utterers.
In dealing with language at the pre-literate stage, the ethnographer is faced by another difficulty. The speech of his people does not live on paper. It exists only in free utterance between man and man. *Verba volant, scripta manent*. The ethnographer has to immobilise the volatile substance of his subject matter and put it on paper. . . . The ethnographic approach thus demonstrates better than any other how deeply language is connected with culture. It also shows how to study language outside the framework of its cultural realities—the beliefs of the people, their social organisation, their legal ideas and economic activities—must remain entirely futile. Language therefore must be linked up with all the other aspects of human culture. Language is not something which can be studied independently of cultural reality. (Malinowski 1935: VI)

This passage seems to speak eloquently to the inseparability of ethnography from theory. If language can’t be understood and separated from social flow it activates and coordinates, then perhaps we should stop searching for a definition in order to conceive a theory-laden ethnography and a life-engaged and “humaning”-attuned anthropology. This methodology would perhaps take Ingold’s definition of participant observation to its radical consequences. Maurice Bloch once put it quite bluntly: he writes “I know what anthropology is,” and explains that he came across it by watching the Zafimaniry in Madagascar asking why people descending from the same ancestors had different languages or whether all humans love their kinsmen equally (2000: 116). Notably, when trying to comprehend “imagination,” Wittgenstein argued, “one ought to ask, not what images are or what goes on when one imagines something, but how the word ‘imagination’ is used” (1953: 270). The same can be applied to “ethnographic theory.” Poignantly, Rita Astuti’s proposal (this issue) speaks to these concerns by pointing out that people know far more than what they say and it is incredibly hard to learn what they never feel the need to verbalize. Thus, the anthropologist could, for example, develop tasks or generate conditions that would challenge an informant to artificially raise imaginative, surprising, and abstract situations that don’t have readymade answers.

Ethnographic Theory’s answer to events, life-processes, or “values” affected by productive uncertainties of everyday life is not an explanation, a truth-effect, or a judgment of rationality or irrationality but rather a “felicitous” intelligibility emerging out of the uncertainty of everyday life, to paraphrase J. L. Austin (1975), or a sort of “satisfaction” (*Befriedigung*), as Wittgenstein ([1967] 1979) put it when confronting the custom of kissing a picture of a loved person, which could otherwise be explained by an alleged sympathetic correspondence between the picture and the person, aimed to generate an effect at distance. But here Wittgenstein wants to move beyond the equivalence between thing or action and concept. Rather, we are in the realm of the *traduttore, traditore*. Equivalence never satisfies. A translation cannot just correspond but must be intelligible. Geoffrey Lloyd once mused that no anthropologist has ever returned from the field announcing that he or she could understand nothing (2004: 4). Because even the denial of the possibility of translation already presupposes a degree of intelligibility from which a conception of translatability would apply (cf. Hanks and Severi 2014; Severi 2014). It is perhaps this effect of *intelligibility, felicitousness, and satisfaction* that a good ethnographic theory aims to seek and deliver.
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References


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