



In Conversation with Professors Jonathan Spencer and Tobias Kelly

Interview by Shivani Gupta

Jonathan Spencer has carried out fieldwork in Sri Lanka since the early 1980s, concentrating at first on rural change and local politics, but writing more recently on ethnic conflict, political violence and political non-violence. His current research looks at the fraught boundary between the religious and the political in Sri Lanka and elsewhere, the history of dissent in Sri Lanka, and the consequences of forced dislocation for poor communities in cities in Sri Lanka and Pakistan. His book on the anthropology of 'the political' and the State in *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy & Violence in South Asia* appeared in 2007. *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque*, written with colleagues from SOAS, Zurich and Peradeniya, on the work of religious organisations in war and peace in Sri Lanka, was published in late 2014. He is a series editor for Cambridge New Directions in Anthropology, and has been a member of the ESRC Training and Development Board, the 2008 RAE sub-panel for Anthropology and the 2014 REF sub-panel for Anthropology and Development Studies.

Tobias Kelly's research interests include human rights, war and peace, and political and legal anthropology. He has carried out ethnographic and archival research in Israel/Palestine, the UK and at the UN. He received a PhD in Anthropology from the London School of Economics in 2003, and has worked at the Institute of Law of Birzeit University, the Crisis States Programme at the LSE, and the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at Oxford University. He is currently leading an ERC Consolidator Grant that looks at the practical and political issues raised by attempts to pro-

tect freedom of conscience. The research examines how claims of conscience are made culturally persuasive, at the meeting point of the apparently religious and secular, the intimate and the public. He is editor of the Ethnographies of Political Violence series with University of Pennsylvania Press.

Shivani Gupta (SG): It is almost an imperative to discuss genealogical influences of an anthropologist. Can you please explain your work and writing over the years in terms of your own intellectual genealogy?

Jonathan Spencer (JS): I started as an undergraduate in anthropology and was very clear from the start that this was what I wanted to do - which in those days was very unusual. But when I actually started doing it, I thought 'Wait a second. This is not what I thought I would be doing.' It was because of what we were taught: there was a very narrow canon in British anthropology up till the 1980s. We were given classic books from the 1920s to the 1950s and everyone had to know them and you weren't always expected to ask why. Some of them, of course, I now realise were very good books, but when books are given to you in that spirit you don't necessarily take them so well. This changed when I worked with an intellectually brilliant (but academically somewhat unproductive) professor in my third year as an undergraduate. This was James Littlejohn. Jimmy encouraged me to read all sorts of things. He was incredibly widely read himself. Two of us shared a weekly tutorial with him and we read books like Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Conrad's

Heart of Darkness. The memorable one for me was Foucault's *The Order of Things*. This was in 1975 or 1976, when Foucault was not as well known as he is now. I had no idea what was going when I started to read the book. I really suffered for a week to get through it. I wrote an essay and Jimmy wrote on the bottom of it, 'This is a very clear account of what you think Foucault is saying. But as I am not sure myself what Foucault is saying I cannot make any further comment.'

Afterwards, I went to the University of Chicago to start graduate school. At this point in time, I became very influenced by Bernard Cohn. I went to Chicago to sit at the feet of Marshall Sahlins and I really liked Marshall Sahlins as a person, and respected him intellectually, but I realised that the kind of structuralist history he was then working on wasn't for me. Barney Cohn was about to become much better known, but at that point he was still not widely known. He had been ploughing a lonely furrow between history and anthropology since the 1950s and I was very sympathetic to his approach. I came back to Britain to finish my PhD in Oxford. Oxford took a hands-off approach to supervision. This had its pluses and minuses. One of the minuses was that nobody was pushing me in any particular intellectual direction so my main inspiration came from my peers who were working in and on Sri Lanka at that time. After that, I think it was teaching that broadened my intellectual horizons. The other thing that was always very important to me was that the set of intellectual problems that preoccupied me was not merely driven by my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, but also to some extent responded to an agenda set by friends and intellectual colleagues there. What was bothering them was what bothered me. I had a strong feeling that I should do a kind of anthropology which did not simply take stuff away from the place I was studying, and then only address what often seemed rather parochial debates in metropolitan anthropology.

Tobias Kelly (TK): It is funny that Jonathan mentioned doing that undergraduate degree in anthropology. In the UK you have to select your subject when

you're 17 or 18, and so to discover that anthropology even exists is itself a slightly strange thing. I was actually taught by Jonathan 20 years ago as an undergraduate. As with many people, for much of my degree I did not necessarily understand what the subject was about, or what the intellectual tools were, or why they might be useful. There was a moment though when I was in my fourth year and we were set Pierre Bourdieu. As a group we got really obsessed by these texts. This was the first time I really had the sense that anthropology had the tools to help you see things in a different way. We spent a reading week on the Mull of Kintyre which is miles away in Scotland, seven hours drive from Edinburgh, at the edge of the world. We were staying in this cold, drafty, damp house going through Bourdieu line by line. In this moment I felt, 'Ah - anthropology has these tools that can help you unlock the world,' (even if I have not really returned to Bourdieu since).

After that I went to the LSE where I had a very different supervisor experience from Jonathan. I was supervised by two very different but remarkable people. One was Martha Mundy and the other was the late Peter Loizos. They gave me a training in a profound sense, by always questioning me about my work. They asked me 'Where is your evidence? Does this make sense? This sentence is completely illogical.' And the other thing they gave me was a sense of the importance of reading widely and reading beyond your topic, which of course is difficult when you're supposed to finish your PhD within 3 or 4 years. They also gave me a sense of the importance of detail. So the combination of these things is something I have tried to take with me. I suspect they both might be slightly disappointed with what I have done with it.

JS: Immediately after finishing my PhD and before ending up in Edinburgh I taught for a year at the LSE. I already had good friends there because it had recently become the big centre for South Asian anthropology in Britain. The department at the LSE at that point in the early 1990s was for me clearly the best in Britain, quite probably the best in Europe. They had a productive mix of people who were deeply

committed to careful fieldwork, like Jonathan Parry and Chris Fuller, but they also had Maurice Bloch and Alfred Gell, who simply fizzed with ideas, and the creative tension between these two poles made it a great place to be. Adding to this mixture was that they had a very strong cohort of PhD students. All this influenced me greatly. But I have this unfortunate habit of kicking against the place I am in. In Chicago I learnt a lot from people but at the same time I really didn't want to be like them. I loved my time at the LSE but I didn't necessarily want to reproduce the specific intellectual atmosphere there at the time.

SG: Both of you mentioned anthropology in Britain, and you have studied in the US (Prof. Spencer), do you think there is a friction/debate between British and American Anthropology?

TK: Not in terms of the theories we draw on. I think it's in many ways the same. We attend the same conferences, write and publish for the same journals. I think one difference might be in terms of writing style, although this is far from absolute. Not so much in content, but the way arguments are produced or presented. In terms of theoretical work, many of us are doing pretty much the same thing. We belong to very much the same intellectual world.

JS: In my experience there was more difference when I was in my undergraduate degree. Figures like Sahlins were allowed to creep into the syllabus after a careful vetting. Scholars like Geertz were treated with much greater suspicion in Britain than in the US. About the time I left Chicago, French theory hit the US, whereas it had hit Britain a decade earlier in the 1970s when I was an undergraduate, surrounded by bearded men talking about Althusser all the time. So, in British social science, people had been already been immersed in, and to some extent come out the other side of, what we now call French theory, but in the US it became much more pervasive. (You could track the British engagement through the pages of a journal like *Critique of Anthropology* in the late 1970s and early 1980s.)

There is still some difference between the US and the UK. You could say it is mostly rhetorical, but for some in Britain there is still a suspicion about too much abstraction. There is also a tradition going back to Boas and his students like Mead and Benedict for American anthropology to be an overtly moralising discipline. The British anthropology of the mid-20th century was much more diffident in its public pronouncements. Some of this endures even after the postmodern moment where everyone has embraced apparent uncertainties around theory and epistemology, and everything - except around political positions where there is much more apparent certainty about what is right and what is wrong. That can be a slightly confining spirit for a discipline like anthropology where you need to be forced to examine your presumptions about everything.

SG: You mentioned Mead and Benedict in the field of Anthropology in the 1970s. They have influenced a lot of writing for contemporary anthropologists but their major influence has also been on feminist anthropology and feminist ethnography. Do you think there can be feminist anthropology/ethnography? Do you think it changes the way you approach the field and your interlocutors?

TK: I am trying to think in terms of my own experience. I think it has to, doesn't it? It provides sensitivity about the kind of questions you ask, who you ask them to, the way you write, and who you acknowledge. It is absolutely critical.

JS: I find myself digging out lines from what I taught Toby as an undergraduate. In those days I had a line on the *Writing Culture* moment. I felt that it was the feminist anthropology of the 1970s which had definitively destabilised the old ways of doing ethnography. From the first feminist critiques, you could no longer write as if you're writing from nowhere, not once it has been pointed out that you are situated, if you are a man you have access to some things and not to other things. Although *Writing Culture* built on that radical moment, the earlier feminist critique went relatively unacknowledged. It was Marilyn Strathern who

famously wrote about the tensions between feminism and anthropology back at that point in time. There was a kind of incompatibility, or at least friction, in that feminism wanted to change humanity, and ultimately overthrow its Other — patriarchy — whereas anthropology seemingly wanted to embrace or understand the Other. These are not the same project at all.

I suppose in the long term I am not disappointed with feminism but with our inability as academics to remodel the way things are done and said, in order to accommodate the challenges that feminist colleagues have given us. The progress on this has been much smaller than it ought to have been. That does dismay me. Academia is often still a 'blokey' world, and this is apparent in the ways in which arguments are made and the way people assert themselves. The standard institutional model of academic life still seems to assume you have a passive partner at home, looking after everything practical, and all you have to do is read, be brainy and write great thoughts. These assumptions and practices continue to exist.

TK: One of the big challenges is the problem of the 'leaky pipe'. So if you look at our undergraduates, they are 80% female. Postgraduates are 70% female. But the faculty are 60% male, and professors are 80% male. That is a really big problem. There are all sorts of reasons why that is the case. I don't think we have addressed the gendered implications of our career structures at all.

JS: Women are still disproportionately represented in non-permanent, often precarious, positions. Unfortunately, this was pretty much the situation 30 years earlier as well.

TK: Class is of course the other part of the story, which makes it more complicated. I think it helps to explain some of the reasons for the leaky pipe, for why relatively few women end up pursuing long-term academic careers.

SG: I think that is true for most of the academic institutions around the world. Taking a step back, what

was the field of anthropology when you entered it immediately after your PhDs? What were some of the key concerns that anthropologists were asking? Are those questions still relevant?

TK: I was lucky to get a tenure track and a permanent job when I was relatively young. Now I would not even get near a long-list. I don't think I had a single piece published. It was a relatively good time to get into academia. It was maybe because of a generational turn as well, as a lot of people were retiring and so there were lots of jobs around. Intellectually my PhD was on Israel/Palestine, and the tense politics there were my dominant concern. My aim was to find a way through that. To go back to things Jonathan was saying earlier, to have an ethnographic sensitivity, but to maintain a kind of critical intellectual and political stance. I thought about how to do that in practice. To be honest, to do that I turned beyond anthropology because I don't think anthropology had all the answers to help me. I was highly influenced by Critical Legal Theory. It helped me find a way in which I could be critical of things I was finding, but still have somewhere to stand within it.

JS: My first job in 1987 was a one-year job, and one of the things I realised after a month or two was that I was the only one teaching that term in the department who hadn't been there at least 10 years or so. I thought, if I was going to work in an office or in an insurance company, I wouldn't be working with people who had all been working with one another for that long. Behind this was the story of the expansion in British universities in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by rather an abrupt shutting off of the tap in the late 1970s. I arrived in the wake of that. These institutions, I was teaching at Sussex, had up to then only known expansion. They didn't have any experience of how to deal with contraction and loss of funds. One thing was certain, there was a general sense of demoralisation. I remember one of my colleagues saying I could either continue looking for jobs in anthropology, or if I was successful, become the person who got to switch off the lights on British anthropology. That didn't make me feel great.

The 1970s were the decade of structuralism and structural Marxism in Britain (and across Europe) but what was arriving over the horizon was postmodernism and postcolonialism. Postcolonialism can obviously trace its influence to Said's *Orientalism*. For me it was simply axiomatic that everything you do is coloured by an awareness of colonialism and its history, and its enduring presence in academic practice. The French theory stuff I was a great deal more sceptical about. There were big rows in seminars in Sussex where if somebody was trying to be a bit *Writing Culture* in their presentation, some more senior colleagues would get quite cross in response. The other thing for me, when I came back from the field was nationalism. There wasn't much anthropology to help with that. I remember fellow students scoffing at the idea that you could even think of that as a topic for anthropology. They told me I should not be worrying about this kind of thing when I could be studying such interesting things as animism or shamanism, or from the other wing, peasant modes of production. Again, this forces you to take influences from the work that is available from history, political theory and fields like that. There was no clear anthropological genealogy I could plug into for nationalism - but it feels very different now.

TK: We both work in the School of Social and Political Science. One of the great things for students and teachers is that they are forced to engage with political science and sociology, for example. I think it helps you widen your intellectual horizons and think carefully about what might be specific about your discipline.

SG: Prof. Spencer, in your earlier works you have written about your discomfort with Subaltern Studies, especially in reference to Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee. You have also written about reviving the state. Can you please elaborate on it?

JS: First of all, the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies* were simply wonderful, and the fact that people still refer to 'Subaltern Studies' as a singular point of reference attests to their importance, even if there was never a singular intellectual viewpoint in the first place.

Having said that, I did feel some frustration with the way in which quite a lot of the first wave of postcolonial theory fell back into presumptions taken from modernisation theory. This is even true of Bernard Cohn. Analytically, you could divide the world into a 'before' and 'after', and at the same time recover some relatively pure 'before' the colonial moment, or you could seek a zone of peasant or subaltern alterity outside the grips of colonial modernity. To me the historical consequences of colonialism, and the historical situatedness of the people of the once colonised world, are not simple problems. You need to analyse them in a way that doesn't inadvertently reproduce more or less colonial ways of looking at things, only reversing the values attached. So there is a need to not romanticise the situation one is writing about. In the particular context of the State, people don't always see the state as a entirely alien and outside their lives, as some of that early work from the Subaltern group seemed to imply. This is as much as anything an empirical point for me. Working in a part of South Asia where the state had made a massive material difference to people in terms of health, and education and life chances, quite simply the state mattered. It still does in terms of health care. Rural health care support in Sri Lanka is completely brilliant. For maternal health, for example, the figure and statistics are really impressive, and this is because of state agents, in this case rural midwives, who go out on their scooters to check up on pregnant women in every village. I have always been a bit suspicious of comfortable intellectuals pontificating about the evils of development or the evils of the State, when they themselves have unproblematic access to education, health and stuff like that, whereas people in other circumstances literally die in the absence of that.

The anthropology of the state is one field where I genuinely feel we know much more about what is interesting to ask and do than we did a generation ago. I mean there are loads of ethnographic and theoretical works available now which were not available back then in the early 1980s.

TK: Can I ask a question?

SG: Please do.

TK: With the current increase in work on the anthropology of the state, do you think the analytical tools being used have been able to provide some answers to questions were/are being asked.

JS: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Empirically, certainly yes. Analytically, sometimes no, because some of the problems, like the problem of the tension between what Abrams called the 'state idea' and the 'state apparatus', or the tension between the idea of a singular state 'out there' and the ethnographic engagement with particular things and places is still very unresolved. So for every brilliant ethnographic deconstruction of 'the state' you read, there are a hundred things being written where the state is presented as this external being, apparently conscious and intentional, somewhere outside the empirical frame, doing stuff to people. There are times you have heard me in a seminar ask a speaker what are they talking about when they talk about the state. And sometimes they say 'What kind of question is that?' The state is self evident but also mysterious. I think it is built into the political structures we inhabit. We can't actually live our lives without talking about 'the government' or 'the regime'. In practical terms, we also obviously cannot do without the apparatus.

SG: I was having this discussion with a colleague of mine on religion and state. I was telling her how I don't engage, participate and perform in religious rituals and that I don't believe in it. She said religion is an institution and you choose not to follow it but so is the state but you do follow it. I said how much of a "choice" do I have there. It is so pervasive and ubiquitous.

TK: Absolutely, and that is really the lesson from a lot of my Palestinian fieldwork, in the sense that one really misses it when it is not there. There is then a sense of statelessness everywhere, in terms of institutions, bureaucracy, people constantly trying to find a language of the state. It is always very hard and they are always excluded from the benefits.

SG: Prof. Kelly, please correct me if I am wrong, you have approached both your books, *Law, violence, and sovereignty among West Bank Palestinians* and *This side of silence: humans, rights, torture and the recognition of cruelty*, from a right-based approach, while using violence and law as theoretical mediums. You have evoked the issue of individual rights in both. Why is it important to talk about individual rights in contemporary political, legal and social scenarios rather than only taking about justice — especially with the recent events in regard to US denying recognition of Palestine as a country?

TK: Rights to me are an ethnographic attraction simply because people are talking about rights. That is I follow people and see what they are doing when they are doing it. In the Palestinian context, people constantly invoked the language of rights. They mean all sorts of different things by that and that is what is interesting. But it is always political institutions and relationships that shape the meaning and availability of rights - in other words the state. Especially in this sense: the relative non-recognition of Palestinian rights gets to the heart of what we are talking about when we talk about the state (and its absence), what is the state for and what does it actually do.

SG: Closely associated with the earlier question, I have a question regarding activism. There is a lot of discussion by ethnographers in getting involved in activism while researching in the field. Did you encounter that while you were in the field — as both of you have worked in areas affected by violence which has seen huge amounts of civil unrest and activism?

TK: It is complicated. We anthropologists are humans. We have social commitments. But I don't entirely buy the argument that anthropology should only be a form of activism simply because I think there are better ways of doing activism. If you want to do activism then maybe you should think strategically about whether there are better ways to write, or better audiences to talk to, and so on. But this doesn't mean that I don't think that anthropologists can and should not be engaged in particular ways, both with

their anthropological hats on, and with them off. We have a duty in some contexts, and we have skills, obligations and responsibilities to the people we work with. So we should think about the contribution we can make, and at the same time we should know that it is going to be very small. But that doesn't mean we should not try doing it, while recognising that, as Jonathan said, we should always be aware of the limits of our political commitments and think about the grounds we are committed to while we remain committed.

JS: There is a difference between the two settings. Where Toby works there is no shortage of Westerners, outsiders, activists, all over the place, so it is an obvious option to make a positive decision about how much to identify with that. In Sri Lanka it is different. There are simple political limits to what an outsider could do. There was one Australian woman, married to a senior LTTE figure, who was very active with the LTTE and whose role I found troubling. I would think, why is she doing this stuff. Why is she saying this is her struggle? What is going on here? In a context where people are highly conscious of their colonial legacy it seems to be a matter of politeness not to lecture them: 'I know what your problems are and this is how you should fix them.' It is much more a matter, at least for me, of contributing from the margins to conversations that are happening there amongst politically very committed people – as just another voice in the conversation, sometimes having the benefits of distance or of certain kinds of knowledge. But certainly, not having a kind of final authoritative voice at all.

During my doctoral research I had very limited engagement with politically active people in Sri Lanka. But since the early 1990s, my closest friends are public intellectuals, and for better or worse, they have much more of a presence, relatively speaking, than a public intellectual would have in Britain (to put it mildly). I learn from them all the time. I learn from what they are doing. But my role again has limits to what I can do. A Western professor noisily supporting some position can be very easily counterproductive.

Sometimes, showing just solidarity and support is the most important thing. A lot of the time it is what can you do to help create space for people who are under pressure.

To take a real life example now, which deeply troubles me, the situation of our academic colleagues in Turkey. Academics in Turkey are currently under the cosh like nobody anywhere else I know. They have been threatened with prison for signing petitions and what do we have available to help? Often the thing we need to be able to do is to find a place somewhere outside Turkey for them to carry on, but with the kind of immigration regimes that we live in, this is incredibly difficult to do so. My father-in-law came in as a refugee academic to Britain in the 1930s. He lived due to the fact that he managed to find a home for himself in a British university. I don't know how often we can do that for someone from Turkey at the moment. That to me seems to be a terrible situation. There have been moments like that in Sri Lanka. Whenever I have tried doing that for colleagues from Sri Lanka in much darker times in the past, they have instead got something in the US or Canada. But can you imagine the same situation right now?

SG: Do you also think that if you do become part of movements it disturbs the field and takes away the distance that is important to understand the situation as an ethnographer?

TK: I think engagement, sympathy, compassion is central to the ethnographic endeavour. So you can't remain completely objective. I don't think it is realistic. But at the same time you need to try to find spaces where you can reflect critically on what is going on. Yet, I don't think we have the obligation to write about everything and be critical of everything. I think sometimes we should say I am not going to write about that, because there are other more important things than an academic article. Some kind of engagement is important but the extent we engage is tactical. It changes from case to case.

JS: I also think that tacking back and forth between a

more or less objectivist kind of position and a more deeply engaged one is helpful. We self-consciously move between these positions. We need to be aware that we possess the point of view of privileged academics. We are deeply privileged in lots and lots of ways, so distance can be productive in terms of seeing things that are not obvious if you are completely caught up in something. Distance is a product of privilege and we should never ever forget that. But at the same time thinking distance is somehow inauthentic, and the only real point of view is being down there in the front line, is possibly missing the point too. You are never going to be perfectly in control of that process but you must try to be conscious of the limits of - or the virtue of - sitting at a desk, miles away from the action, or the limits of being in the middle of things with all the smoke and fire around.

TK: When I was doing my fieldwork for my PhD thesis 18 years back I had two assumptions about this. One I think was wrong and the other was right. The first one was that there is injustice in the world because people don't know what is going on. Therefore, doing anthropology is about bringing justice into the world and things will change for the better. I don't think that is true. I think there is injustice in the world for political and a lot of other reasons, but not because of a lack of knowledge. People know what is going on and they are OK with it, and maybe anthropologists aren't the best people to reveal what is going on in any case. The second assumption, which I do still hold, is that within a deeply fraught context, such as Israel-Palestine, probably the most, one of the most powerful, things we can do, especially as an anthropologist, is simply describe what is going on to the absolute minute level. To take a step back, which is a privileged position, and think about 'This is what is actually like to be a woman, a man, a child in Palestinian territories.' That kind of empiricism, not naive empiricism, does have a place and is separate from any grand political stance.

SG: Both of your work engage with the issue of violence. How do you understand violence plays out in everyday realities and lives of the informants? Also,

what according to you in the contemporary period is a challenge as an anthropologist to deal with violence as both a topic and fieldwork experience?

JS: I was just thinking in the beginning of this interview that I sometimes take a particularly hard-line on violence as an ethnographic problem. To me, it is rarely the case that you are going to understand violence better by 'being there.' I know of ethnographers who have found themselves in the middle of disturbing moments of violence who have been quite damaged by that experience. They are humans like any other and why shouldn't they be disturbed by that experience. If we are in the middle of it, then we won't necessarily get a helpful perspective. When I was in Sri Lanka in July 1983, I was 100 miles or so away from the worst violence. I was desperate to be where it was happening and to find out about what was going on and to be in the middle of it. Eventually I did somehow manage to speak on the phone to a friend of mine who was much closer to what was happening. He said, 'Don't be stupid, just sit where you are. There's nothing helpful you can contribute here. In the future people will be grateful to have the perspective of the people who were at the edge of what was happening at that particular time.' He was absolutely right. You can talk to people afterwards, you can read documents, you don't shy away from the topic, but you are not a war reporter, you don't have that obligation. You don't get any analytical clarity by being terrified or traumatised. There is something slightly distasteful about the rhetoric that is employed by some people writing about these things.

The other part of your question is about the everyday presence of violence. This is a very important question and I don't think there is a single answer to it. You can see continuities and discontinuities and you can track these in the way that Veena Das does, the way in which one traces something that happened generations ago, but is still buried in everyday relations even though it's not spoken of. I have been thinking recently that when I grew up, most fathers - or lots of fathers - of children I grew up with, had been active in the Second World War. Many must have been put

in situations that were terrifying or traumatising - but no one spoke about it. You realise this now when looking back that there were quite a few disturbed adult males around you. But this is what happens when you put people into a war. The reason nobody spoke about it at all was because that was part of the environment. When I grew up there was a silence around that in the everyday. I just sit here scratching my head thinking, what did that mean? How did that affect the world we were in? People became more conscious of it during the Vietnam war. It was a kind of watershed in terms of people thinking about the consequences of war for the people involved in it. When we grew up, we didn't think about that. Then obviously going to Sri Lanka where people have lived through really terrible events, and it is often amazing to see what they make of themselves, thinking about all they have endured.

TK: I have worked with several projects that have violence as a keyword, but I am troubled intellectually by the attraction to violence within anthropology and academia, this desire to get closer to the flames as it were.

When asking questions of people who have been through violent experiences, you also have to think about whether it is necessary and appropriate. One of the key issues though is that although survivors may (or may not) find it difficult to articulate their experiences of violence, we may also find it difficult to acknowledge that violence. Categorising something as violence is always moral and political. This has made me focus on the people who do the categorisation – people like doctors, lawyers, the caseworkers, bureaucrats. I take a step back and try to understand how we socially, politically, legally, think about violence. This enables me to analyse what constitutes something as violence and suffering, and therefore as worthy of recognition.

SG: Do you think there is hierarchy between structural forms of violence and overt forms?

JS: I think what we need to do is to think about what

is the positive work that a concept like structural violence does. The positive work is to draw attention to inequalities, injustices, things that do impact on people, and on their lives. The negative consequences can be a flattening out and a loss of perspective. For example I heard a presentation by a young graduate student about NGOs in Sri Lanka: in the language of the North American graduate school, he was constantly accusing the NGOs of 'doing violence' to the people they were meant to be helping. In a country where as many as 40,000 people may have been killed in a couple of months, in a really brutal war, we need to be a little bit careful about how we use the word 'violence'. These NGOs may be somewhat annoying, and they may be disingenuous, but to treat that as equivalent to bombing and shelling is not really helpful to anybody. I have to say that the point was not taken very well at all. So I think that we have to be careful with the desire to make violence into a much more diffuse property of social life (and then to claim victim status because of some sense of hurt).

TK: As Jonathan said I think the concept of structural violence helps us rethink why some forms of violence and suffering are 'legitimised' or taken for granted. But as Jonathan also says we need to be more careful about spreading the concept too thinly. I am uneasy about it for the reasons Jonathan said.

SG: Prof. Spencer, in your latest book, *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace*, you have questioned if religion is the cause of conflict? Can you please elaborate on that? Prof. Kelly, I would really like to hear your opinion on it as well.

JS: Yes. We're talking one day [7 March 2018] after the declaration of a State of Emergency in Sri Lanka brought on by attacks on Muslims, attacks in which some Buddhist monks have clearly been playing a leading part. So there is no empirical problem for me in acknowledging the violent potential of religious attachments. *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque: A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace* actually has two sides to it. As well as the role of religion in

fomenting violence, it also presents arguments about the kind of mediating and peace-making work religious people do. So I suppose one simple take-away line would be, it is not as simple as that. It is not a question of either this or that. We shouldn't be shocked by the fact that some Buddhist monks are associated with political violence. But also we should not assume that all religious actors are inherently violent and dangerous people. And the same people can play both roles as well. So you need a more complex take on what religion does.

I suppose what surprised me in this work was that I found myself being pushed back towards recognition of the classic Durkheimian properties of religion. When I started I might have been quite upset to discover that was where it was going to end up. But it was the institutional strength of religious institutions, in a setting where the State was partly absent, and where violent contestation had blown apart local structures of sociality. The temple and the church became the place people went to for refuge, not least for their organisational capacities. So much of the anthropology of religion is currently about ideas and intellectual consequences. It wasn't the ideas that seemed to be necessarily the most significant aspect of religion. It was for some people, but it was the institutions for others.

TK: I have to admit that I was somewhat deaf to religion in my PhD fieldwork - partly for reasons of personal biography and partly for analytical reasons - and that is a limit of my work in hindsight. I deliberately decided not to treat religion as an issue because it seemed over-determined. It seemed to me it was not religion that was as at stake in most people's lives. I now realise that it is more complicated than that. Also, I felt that the anthropology of religion at that point, and even now, maybe more so, in particular the anthropology of Islam, simply did not have the tools to understand what was going on in a context such as the Palestinian territories. It did not take into account institutional structures, economic processes, political influences. It seemed to me too instrumental, too individualising, and the tools were simply not there. I

did not have the intellectual resources to study such territories from the point of view of religion.

SG: Prof. Kelly, what drew you to social and legal anthropology? What debates and discussions would you like to see in the field of legal and social anthropology.

TK: I think it is probably an old cliché about anthropology being an attempt to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. The anthropology of law, like the anthropology of the state, has grown a lot in the last 20 years, and one of the key things has been to take law seriously as culture. But one of the things that happens when you focus on the law, is that you end up focusing too narrowly on law and start taking it for granted. To have an alternative perspective on law helps you understand the ways in which legal claims, legal processes, fit into people's lives. In many ways, it is much the same with religion. If you only ask people questions about Islam then they will only give you answers about religion, and you miss out on the thickness of people's lives, people's commitments, people's obligations, people's relationship and concerns. If you ask people only about legal processes and legal practices you miss the way in which the law fits in society.

SG: Prof. Spencer, your initial work delves into rendering politics intelligible in anthropology.

JS: That has happened.

SG: Do you think there has been a change in the writing and producing of political anthropologies since your book "*Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy & Violence in South Asia?*" If not, what changes would like see in political anthropology?

JS: Within the anthropology of South Asia, I felt quite lonely when I first started to talk about nationalism and democracy 20 or 30 years ago, but this is clearly not the case now. There is really strong work on political themes coming out now. We know much more now about the details and dynamics of issues of democracy and politics than we did 30 years ago. I

think we are now on the verge of a further new wave of interesting ideas and analyses. So in that respect political anthropology has become central, and there are many outstanding young scholars working in the field.

Having said that, I did once say that political anthropology was the sub-discipline that died of boredom, and there is still a version of it, where you go into a setting and you study something like an NGO meeting, reported in a way that seems intended to accentuate the dullness of it all. You're probably stripping out all of the things that make it a little bit strange or weird. There is still plenty of that around. There is a kind of default model generic political anthropology, which might now, say, drop the name of Gramsci or Foucault to add a bit of gloss. But in practice, it is not a lot more interesting than the stuff in the mid-1970s I found so uninspiring. It again comes back to why is it disappointing. I think it is because it is actually quite hard work to live up to the promise we make to the world as anthropologists. The promise that we are going to produce something exciting and interesting and a lot of the time we fall back on clichés or we observe silence.

I am as capable as anyone of producing pretty boring stuff. If I think of anthropologists I have known in my life, there are only a few who, if I knew they were going to speak or even simply be present at an event, I would think, 'This is bound to be really interesting. I am going to come away with something new from this.' Alfred Gell was an example. He was a very different kind of anthropologist but I used to catch myself smiling coming into a seminar, knowing that if Alfred was there then something was going to happen, like there was a box of fireworks in the corner of the room. I might completely disagree with him but he couldn't be boring. He couldn't do it. We can all aspire to produce that effect in those around us, even if few of us manage it in practice.

SG: What motivated or drew you to your specific fieldwork location?

TK: I think many people have a sense of serendipity. If I had one reason it was the problematic but complex attraction to social justice in the case of Palestine. As for the UK as a site for my fieldwork, the motivation was to make the familiar strange. Also partly for domestic reasons, and these are important to acknowledge. Going back to the question of the leaky pipe, and how you structure an academic career, some of the projects which are 'at home' are relatively easier to do in the context of having two small children.

JS: Actually Toby and I both did undergraduate work on the places where we finally did our PhDs. It was a sort of intellectual investment that I made as an extension of something I had once done on a course, which in turn became a dissertation. When I went to Chicago I was actually thinking of working in Kerala, but at that point if you went to work in South Asia from Chicago you felt obliged to engage with this thing called ethnosociology. I didn't want to do that. So deciding to work in Sri Lanka was a way of putting some distance from that. I was also doing it because it was not India. From the point of view of the literature it was much more manageable than India, which is always terrifying. There is always so much appearing all the time about it. After making the initial investment, Sri Lanka started to appeal because of other things that attracted me. The density of colonial experience there, for example, which meant this was not a place you could write about as if it was untouched or premodern.

SG: What do you think are the barriers that anthropology as a discipline needs to break down?

TK: There is the classic line there about making the world safe for difference. I think that still stands. I think that is something we can still say. This needs to be communicated strongly. This still remains central to our work. I think that is why I do anthropology.

JS: So there is a kind of benign mission. The benign mission is nothing else than to celebrate or to draw attention to the people who are being not heard in jumbled up pluralistic settings. My last book in a way

was partly about that. I think there can be no end to that work.

The dark mission around difference, the one I think is really challenging, and I think we ought to be trying to do, is to understand the everyday life of intolerance and hatred. I recently had a conversation with a former PhD student of ours who has been working with extreme nationalists. He described sitting in a bar where men sat around doing what he called ‘performative hating’. Droning on all day about the many kinds of people they hate and why they hate them. I said to him, somebody ought to do a comparative project on the anthropology of hate. This is really hard. It is difficult. The moral challenge is that you don’t want to dehumanise people. You don’t want to dehumanise Trump supporters. What you need to do is to get to the other side of that. This is what I experienced in the 1980s as ethnic tensions rose in Sri Lanka. I would be with people I liked, but then they would say things about Tamils or Muslims that I found deeply problematic. I would sometimes kick back and sometimes I wouldn’t. It did seem to me really important to try to think reflexively about what allowed me to feel so liberal and cosmopolitan, you know what is it that has allowed me to be like that. It is not some inherent virtue I have got. It is not because I am an anthropologist or anything glib like

that. What is this stuff doing for the people I’m talking to and why don’t I seem to need it?

TK: There is an important sense in which our personal and intellectual properties get completely infused and it is impossible to separate it.

SG: Thank you so much for taking out time and giving us such a fantastic interview.



(L to R): Jonathan Spencer, Tobias Kelly, and Shivani Gupta

Shivani Gupta is a Ph.D. candidate at South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. Her doctoral research is on women’s everyday embodied experiences of city spaces in Banaras (India). Previously, she created and led the advocacy wing at Feminist Approach to Technology (a Delhi-based NGO) and ran workshops on women’s rights and sexuality for young girls from slum areas. She received her Master’s degree in Media and Cultural Studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai, India). Her Master’s thesis was on examining the role of gender and sexuality in learning and performance of Kathak (a form of Indian classical dance). She is an advisory board member for FRIDA- The Young Feminist Fund.
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