

Summary of the interview of Prof. Michael Herzfeld  
November 2011, Montreal, Canada  
Interview and summary by Dr. Sohini Ray,

Q1 Where were you born? Tell us about your early life.

0.38 min

I was destined to be an anthropologist or some kind of an oddball. My parents were of German-Jewish origin, and were upper-middle class professionals from Berlin and both had professional careers of their own which lost during the war. They left Germany in 1933 and moved to England where I was born. The first thing I ever said was ask for more fish in Portuguese – which said that I was interested in food and languages etc. right from then. My parents were a very strong influence; they were not interested in anthropology but they travelled a lot and were interested in languages. My mother always said that learning languages is very important – one has to know at least two languages and it does not need to be German; She used to say we are not English but British; I had a very good French teacher in high school; Early memories of travelling with my parents; Going to Italy at age 14; We travelled to Italy and I was bowled over by opera – we went to an opera about Jewish redemption; at a time when I was beginning to question aspects of religion; understand mortality; I remember listening to the overture and wondering – if the overture ends, the opera will end and life itself might end; That was my first encounter with the idea of mortality;

I was interested in archeology, and was an undergraduate in Cambridge; at that time the kind of archeology that was taught in Cambridge – I did not have much liking for;

In the meanwhile my high school French teacher had allowed to me to sit in the back of the room and teach myself other languages. I learnt Italian and modern Greek, and having gone to school trips to both countries found it very liberating to be able to speak the language and having worked as a travel courier in a Greek shipping company as I entered Cambridge became friends with a bunch of Greek students and at the end of my time because of my disaffection from Archeology; I had decided to be social anthropologist.

I did not like the idea of being an anthropologist in the beginning – that is a very British side of me – I did not like peering into other people's lives; In the Greek village I realized that other people were equally nosy about me and so it was alright; so after I messed up my undergraduate career; I saved myself my getting a scholarship to Greece by this time I spoke very fluently; and after a couple of additional jumps I became a social anthropologist; now looking back I see that this was something probably from somewhere in my background – a kind of salvation; an extraordinarily fulfilling life; much more than an academic discipline; a way of life and a moral universe;

Q2. Who were your teachers/mentors in anthropology?

7:32 min

Because I took the Tripos, I went to lectures of Meyer Fortes, sadly I did not attend Stanley Tambiah's lectures at that time – who later became a wonderful friend and colleague in Harvard. And, I got to know Edmund Leach only after I came to the States; Other than anthropologists a very important teacher was Margaret Alexiou, a Greek philologist; was my master's supervisor; in University of Birmingham. I had met John Campbell in a conference; and I really wanted to work with him and decided to go to Oxford;

In Oxford, I wanted to work with John Campbell, who could not be my supervisor as he was in the faculty of history and so I was assigned the next thing to the Mediterranean – i.e. India. I had Ravi Jain who was an extraordinary teacher. He had a way of never telling me whether he agreed or disagreed with me but mutter in his beard a few questions that would make me think about the issues I was working on again. I always wondered why Ravi's students always took the top slots in the diploma examination. (Exact story 10.50) The day before the examination he invited us to his house for lunch and his wife cooked this wonderful Indian food – there was this crate of beer. I remember lying on the grass quite sated all afternoon; very relaxed and then by the time we staggered home there was not much point in studying and we all took the top slots again. And so, he really knew what he was doing; he was an amazing teacher; and so was John Campbell; he was a very English gentleman of frail health – he had lost one of his lungs to tuberculosis. Some of my moments with my teachers:

In a volume that is a tribute to him I had written about him and he told me in person that 'you saved me from oblivion.' and I was almost in tears; (13.24) Another moment: I thought I was your most unruly student (13.44)– but Michael – I never thought of you as anything but a very good friend – and I was almost in tears and had to find something very quick to change the subject; but I will never forget that moment; that has been a model for me in my relationships with my own students; I have been teaching for about three decades now; One can never separate the personality of the ethnographer from the personality of the teacher; I sometimes wondered that how a English gentleman like him hung out with these very rough Greek shepherds; in retrospect it is not so hard to understand how he connected with them; He had told me that do not stay in a place if you do not like it. I did not listen to him and was kicked out of the country. (details 17.00)

I was once very annoyed with him; and he realized it as in a letter I wrote instead of 'Dear John'; 'Dear Dr.Campbell'; he had always been there for me when things got rough; John never wanted his book to be translated to Greek; of course now he would not have minded; but I hope it comes out into Greek one day; John was one person who understood the context in which knowledge was produced; he was ahead of his time; Another person who was very important to me; Maurice Freedman volunteered to be my supervisor for the first term after the diploma which was very kind of him – I wanted Ravi, and both of them supervised me until John came back from the field.

Q3. Tell us about your life as a teacher. When did you come to the US?

22.38

Ravi and John were very strong influences in the way I interact with my students.

I had dealt with American undergraduates in my first job in Greece; American undergraduates seem much less well-prepared; unfortunately the downgrading of the European undergraduate system has leveled that in recent years but at that time the European undergraduates were much better prepared more because they were better prepared in high school. One is much better off being a graduate student in the States.

My first job was in an all undergraduate college in the US - Vasaar College and it was a trying experience - My first shock was student evaluation; it felt like we are being suppliers to a consumer public. I still do not like the fact that it is anonymous, because I feel it teaches students a very bad sense of responsibility. I respect the fact that there are colleagues who take criticism personally and might penalize a student for criticism. Of course now there is anonymous evaluation everywhere in Europe. I do encourage my students to tell me if they are unhappy about something I am doing.

Over the years I have stuck to some things and experimented with others. I taught the sophomore tutorial for Anthropology majors and I enjoyed it so much and I volunteered to do it again; there have been ups and downs but over the long haul – I have enjoyed teaching both levels – graduate and undergraduate – I suspect I am better at teaching graduate students. I do make demands on my students. My Ph. D. students have to give an academic lecture in their field language about their research; that is political I feel very strongly....if we really want to get rid of the old colonial relationship between anthropologists and the people they study – the place to begin is with our colleagues; if we expect them to come to the west and speak in our language we have to be prepared to lecture in their language; and I practice what I preach. I have given quite a few lectures in Thai now. I try to teach my students not just about anthropology but also certain professional standards – how to speak in public for example; most American students are very poorly trained in it – I try to teach them to lecture the way they would teach and take it as a form of communication.

I always find the question – what's your philosophy of teaching a bit vague. I teach as a human commitment. Over the years I have moved from a position of extreme purism to a position of being tolerant of political and other activism. I started on this position when I started working on historical conservation, where I was looking at gentrification in urban areas, where you are dealing with evictions and personal suffering. An appropriate modality for me is something I called engaged anthropology; and not applied – applied is maybe working in a bank or the government etc. some of it is quite beneficial; but of course the question remains whose interest in being served; engaged anthropology comes out of one's own fieldwork, one's own personal experience. [Example from Bangkok (30.00)]

I see a close relationship between teaching and fieldwork. In fact in a class I often do an ethnographic observation on my students. And, I suspect they realize that. I explain my teaching methods to my students.

Q. 4 After becoming an expert on the Anthropology of Mediterranean you chose to work in Asia, now if you go back to work in Europe how will your eye be influenced by your work in Thailand.

32.43

I was initially purist in my outlook..and I thought I would never work anywhere else other than Greece; but then I got over the purism just like I started working on films; in a series of steps. My longest friendship was with a Thai prince. He went to high school with me. I went to Thailand on a visit met up with my old friend – was invited to give a lecture; and there was one person who asked me some very interesting questions; she was a Cambridge-trained Thai anthropologist. We connected very well and stayed in touch and later she invited me to give a lecture in Thammasat University. That was a time I had planned to do a project on Muslim migrants in Crete; the project was aborted when I realized that there was a Greek graduate student who was doing exactly the same thing. So I backed off; it was a question of basic humanity; this was a point in my career where my ties with Greece were loosening. There was the height of hyper-nationalism with Macedonia, I had a conflict with Cambridge University press over a book on Greece. I was a bit weary of all that and looking for a way out to do something different. I thought of Italy and then in Bangkok when I was talking to this colleague I had a moment of epiphany; and came to Harvard and enrolled in Thai 101; for weeks felt like a total idiot; but then I stuck to my guns. I was thinking of a project on historic conservation – my student pointed me on old town Bangkok. My colleague Mary Steedly gave me a very valuable advice – she asked me to continue working on some of the

things I was doing in Greece and Italy so that there is a bridge between my works in Greece and Rome. I also found the Thai Studies community were very warm and receptive. Prof Tambiah was initially concerned (see 41:00 for detailed story) but later he acknowledged me as his 'successor' in Thai studies; it was like a blessing. So, I have had to justify my interest in Thailand.

So where were we?

Interviewer: If you go back to Greece now and start another project how will your time spent in Thailand influence your work.

MH: Oh yes, of course; I go to Greece every summer with my wife who goes for her work and this time I was mugged – it was like Greece coming and grabbing me and telling me that 'Oh no, you are not going to go away..'" and I wrote another article on Greece. I now understand global dynamics in a very different way.

I had already been arguing that Greece and Italy were very different in the form of their nationalisms. Greece is ideologically very unified, Italy in a few miles you find a new dialect a new cuisine and a strong sense of localism. In Athens everybody speaks the standard language and in Rome there is a local dialect. What increasingly occurred to me is that Greece and Thailand have a lot in common – what I call Crypto-colonialism – the two countries are independent of any colonial powers but that independence is couched in cultural terms that is dictated largely by the west, and this has produced some extra-ordinary parallel effects. Details of the parallels (47.35) that all influences the way I do field-work as I see myself talking to my informants about crypto-colonialism; the term went easily into Thai largely for the efforts of the historian Thongchai Winichakul; In Greece there was a reluctance to accept the idea that Greece could be compared with Asian/third-world country which shows precisely how far they realize the terms of their own domination by western Europe; I will show you by a little incident (details 50.30) after Olympic games – I visited Athens and suddenly everything had changed no scrimmage an orderly line for taxis etc. – and as I commented on it someone said 'Sir we are now Europeans..'" and that just proves my point that you are still in conceptual slavery to the west...some of the younger Greek scholars have started talking about these things more freely, the embedded racism unfortunately all contributes to the fact that; Europe was the touchstone of the global hierarchy of value.

Q 5. Tell us about your life and about your wife.

52.50

She has played such an important role in everything I do.

We met in Greece, in the library of the study abroad program, when I worked for the overseas students program and Nea still works there. I had gone for fieldwork in an island where I did some recordings and I played them for her which she thought were 'wailing noises' My first gift to her were the half used batteries – a very romantic first gift - don't you think? Anyway, she seems to have forgiven me for that. The next summer things really took off and we got married...we decided not to have a honeymoon as I needed to finish my research in the summer and we were living in this beautiful village. But in some time disaster struck and we had to leave the country and Nea and I had our enforced honeymoon in Rome. We are two very different people – she is very quiet, very organized, very good in math – all the things that I am no good at. But over the long haul we share an interest in language, she has been in the field with me - in fact she is a much better ethnographer than I am. For example, in Crete, she could tell the exact kin relation between two people and I would have a terrible time, she would remember details that I would have forgotten, she had a way of engaging people

especially the men - who were very charmed by her – she took many of the photographs. She is a musician, when I met her she was a semi-professional flutist, and I learnt the classical guitar to accompany her, and together we used to give house concerts. But we had to give much of it up once we were fully employed in the US; Nea still plays sometime, but I had to give up completely; may be after I retire I will take it up again ; it will be nice. What else can I say? She has been there for me in a lot of situations where I needed guidance. We have been married for 37 years. And its true when people have been married for a long time they pick up each others habits but we still are very marked individuals but we share many convictions; both of us have a great sense of humor; she certainly needs a good sense of humor to live with me; and she knows how to laugh; as she gets older the only lines you see are the laugh lines (laughs); we laugh a lot.

Q 6. We know that you are a lover of animals – tell us about your pets.

57.47

I have shall we say been trained by a series of cats. Nea my wife is fond of both cats and dogs – I was not so keen on having animals in the house.

Our first cat introduced herself to us by bringing a bloody squirrel which she had killed in the woods behind our house – this is when I was teaching in Vasaar; she kept coming back to our house and ultimately I told Nea that you can give her some milk but don't let her come to the house; she was very beautiful Calico cat; one day I came back from work and she was sitting in the living room –looking at me – she had beautiful green eyes; with a look ‘you won't turn me out of the house, will you?’ later on things got so entangled that having said that she could not come to the house; I would carry her to bed and put her between our pillows not to be woken up in the middle of the night by a half-senile cat who did not know where she was; that is how she spent the last five years of her life; her name was Twitch. We have had a series of wonderful cats since; there was was Claudius who lived to be eighteen; and a year before he died. This fourteen pound big and very muscular cat adopted this one pound kitten, and they would spend hours grooming each other. I am sure it extended Claudius's life.

For me as an anthropologist I have been surprised at my own capacity at enjoying a cat on my lap purring and so on and also to see the kindness that animals are capable of; we tend to think of animals as blood-thirsty; but there is this other side; which gives you are a wider context of thinking about living beings. Of course as human being we tend to project many of our own feeling and emotions on animals — but there are some things that they can teach us about just being; and I actually now really enjoy having a cat in the house.

Q7. About standing up against academic injustice.

1.01.41

It is like engaged anthropology – some of the battles are worth fighting as they become exemplary and give you a model – but I pick my battles. That also supports my argument in supporting the people in Pom Mahakan community in Bangkok. We argue that if we could leave this community of 300 people to gentrify themselves then this will become a model for entire Thailand. The head of Architecture and human rights, a Canadian architect who was working in Thailand and I agreed on this – and done right cities can have green space and not have residents leave; I see a real connection between this and a colleague who is being persecuted as her book will cause inconvenience to a publisher or a colleague who is being denied tenure for some nasty infighting or a case I am looking at right now in my own

university where a colleague has been told that a course cannot be included in a program because it is too ideological. My response was – I think they are being ideological and we need to speak out about it. Things that shade off into each other – it also shades off into the living wage campaign in Harvard that I was involved in. I do not get involved in everything – in fact I was quite annoyed in a AAA meeting when someone tried to grab me and vote for an issue that I knew nothing about – but if I can be persuaded I can have a voice in something I will let the voice be heard; it is a matter of being honest to oneself. We all make enough mistakes hopefully inadvertently and if we can undo some of the mistakes, but consciously if we could do something that makes people's lives a bit better or make our profession a bit more honest then it is worth it. Human beings are not perfect – what makes them worthy or unworthy of respect is whether they can learn from past mistakes so that they can act differently next time – not say I never made any mistakes. For example when I was an undergraduate in Cambridge, I was secretary of the Greek society, many of my fellow undergraduates opposed the Greek Junta, I was not so active as I thought that there were many students who had come to England to study in secretarial courses and learn English and they would be in serious trouble. I regretted my position later. Later when Thongchai Winichakul asked me to chair a controversial panel I hesitated first but then I told myself, “wait do not do this again” It all went very well. Had I not done it I would have felt like a total coward. I try to learn something from my past mistakes not say I never made any mistakes.