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Relationism as revelation or prescription? Some thoughts on how Ingold's implicit critique of modernity could be harnessed to political ecology

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ABSTRACT

Tim Ingold's critique of mainstream modern experiences of human–environmental relations is highly persuasive but almost completely disconnected from considerations of social relations of power and inequality. His emphasis on the phenomenology of local relations seems inevitably detached from the logic of abstract economic and political systems. This article proposes that the distortions of experience that Ingold identifies tend to be produced by the social and ecological conditions of modern society, to which economic and political inequalities are fundamental. The experiential and the political dimensions of modernity are thus two sides of the same coin, and Ingold's critical reflections on the phenomenological repercussions of the modern condition converge with the kind of critiques articulated within political ecology. This convergence is particularly intriguing in relation to our understanding of modern technology. Building on ideas and intuitions that have emerged repeatedly through the history of the philosophy of technology, Ingold's 'anthropology of technology' focuses on the experiential aspects of modern engagements with artefacts or material culture, while a political ecology of technology could be expected to unravel how its dependence on asymmetric resource flows illuminate its global, *distributive* dimension. To reconceptualize modern technology as a means of redistributing human time and natural space is to grasp that it is a phenomenon that straddles the conventional dichotomy of Nature and Society.

KEYWORDS

Tim Ingold; human–environmental relations; modernity; phenomenology; experience; power; inequality; political ecology; technology

Tim Ingold's work is unique in several respects. While solidly grounded in anthropology, it dexterously builds intriguing bridges to a vast archipelago of literature in philosophy, biology, art, architecture and other fields rarely explored by anthropologists. Unlike so much of what is being published on 'environmental humanities,' the 'new materiality,' and 'the ontological turn,' it combines a profound critique of predominant, dualist

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worldviews with analytical rigour and a clear and accessible style. His thinking thus deserves respect for pursuing new and original trails while avoiding obscure jargon – the hallmark of an innovative intellectual who genuinely invites discussion, rather than merely admiration and emulation.

Ingold's brief but useful autobiography 'From science to art and back again' outlines the progression of his concerns from biology through cultural ecology and structural Marxism to a phenomenologically inspired, monistic 'relationism' evoking affinities with art. I sympathize with his celebration of the wondrous diversity of biological and material forms continuously generated in the myriad relations in which living things are immersed. As he suggests, this childlike fascination with the wonders of the natural world is no doubt in part the heritage of past generations of biologists, whose sense of awe over its 'exquisite beauty' is combined with 'silent gratitude for what we owe the world for our existence' (Ingold, 2018). Precisely because I share his biophilia, however, I am curious about what he has to say about contemporary *threats* to global biodiversity. Considering the state of the planet today, I would expect his indignation to be proportional to his sense of wonder and gratitude. My response to his essay will thus focus on the relation between his extensive insights regarding the processes by which living forms are generated, on the one hand, and his conspicuous silence on the processes by which they are destroyed, on the other. While the former concern necessarily emphasizes domains of local experience, the latter must address global political ecology.

The boundless, holistic aspirations of anthropology open doors in both directions. Ingold has thoroughly explored and charted the sensory, perceptual engagement of humans with their immediate environment, but hesitated to venture into the abstract territory of global political economy. Although the two concerns require distinct conceptual tools, they are not unrelated. It can be argued that the logic of global markets and the concepts of mainstream economics are precisely what has obscured that which Ingold has been struggling to articulate. Anthropologists are generally receptive to both kinds of observations: the exploration of the experience-near, extra-linguistic involvement of humans in their material surroundings, and the analysis of the discursive and political frameworks which *condition* such involvement. To a significant extent, the latter conditions have for more than two centuries increasingly constrained most humans from experiencing the world in the way that Ingold advocates. Those conditions have been variously called 'modernity,' 'capitalism,' 'the market,' 'industrialism,' and so on, but Ingold only occasionally and briefly confirms that these are indeed the targets of his critique. Many critical anthropologists (myself included) have chosen to direct their discontents explicitly at such abstractions, and to theoretically dissect their historical, political, cultural, and ontological foundations, but Ingold's mission has been to familiarize us more directly with the world that we have lost, or rather with the world as we could have experienced it.

This project is in itself a formidable undertaking. It has convinced a great number of us – both within and beyond anthropology – that the lenses and cognitive filters through which we moderns have learned to perceive our environment may have distorted our experience of being human. But such an observation raises several problematic questions for a discipline accustomed to celebrating cultural relativism. When Ingold asserts that living organisms should be perceived as 'bundles of lines' rather than 'blobs' (2018, 216), is he suggesting that the former view is more correct, and the latter mistaken?

How would he account for the fact that most people on Earth now adhere to the latter perception? What is the source of his alternative insight? Does it derive from his experiences of ethnographic fieldwork among the Saami or from a practice of handicraft or art? If a majority of humans could be persuaded to reconceptualize organisms as lines rather than blobs, would it make a difference to the future of the world?

I believe that all these questions can be given answers that in no way detract from the validity of Ingold's perspective, but I am sometimes frustrated by his tendency to ignore them. Whether a product of our sensory constitution or of the Enlightenment, the reification of organisms conceived as bounded 'blobs' rather than interpenetrating bundles of relations can be challenged in two quite different ways: by emphasizing either their *experiential* relations (as does Ingold) or the *material* relations of exchange through which they exist and are reproduced. Given his background in biology and ecology, Ingold is naturally aware that organisms should not be excised from either of these aspects of their 'fields of relations,' but his more or less exclusive focus on the former tends to obscure the crucial fact that the semiotic and the material aspects of ecological relations are mutually constitutive. The most significant implication of Jakob von Uexküll's (2010) 'ecosemiotic' perspective is that the interaction and coevolution of myriad subjectivities (*Umwelten*) is as fundamental to the constitution of ecosystems as the flows of matter and energy to which the quantitative methods of modern natural science are confined (Hornborg 2001). Ecology is essentially about relations of interpenetration that are both semiotic and material, but the modern science of ecology only recognizes the latter.

Uexküll clearly recognized an analytical distinction between an organism's subjective and perceptual *Umwelt*, on the one hand, and its objective biochemical conditions and processes, on the other. This distinction is cognate to the emic/etic distinction that was so prevalent in the cultural ecology that Ingold abandoned in the 1970s. Since then, Ingold has experimented with several approaches to integrating both the subjective and the objective and the social and the natural. In the early 1980s, he reminds us, he followed Structural Marxism in rejecting the 'vulgar materialism' of cultural ecology, for which the distinction between the subjective (emic) and objective (etic) was equivalent to the *determination* of the subjective by the objective – culture by ecology. Following Baudrillard, Sahlins (1976) turned this model upside down by showing that culture instead unfolded according to its own semiotic logic, and Structural Marxists such as Godelier (1978) and Friedman (1974) emphasized the recurrently contradictory relation between the relatively autonomous levels of society and nature. In its essentials, the latter approach remains compatible with the contemporary recognition that globalized capitalism is unsustainable. For many anthropologists, however, the aspiration to establish the character of the relation between an abstract society and an abstract nature ultimately led to a desire to dissolve the boundary between them. For Tim Ingold, Bruno Latour, and many others, the very categories 'society' and 'nature' emerged as obsolete (c.f. Latour 1993; Descola and Pálsson 1996). As Ingold recalls, it was his failure to 'hive off the social from the ecological' that drove him to sympathize with artists 'struggling to break down the boundaries between the human and the non-human' (2018, 225).

Efforts to dissolve such boundaries – between society and nature, humans and non-humans – dominate contemporary anthropology, but those of Ingold are unique in not succumbing to the opaque and amorphous rhetoric currently prevalent in so-called post-human approaches (Hornborg 2017). Moreover, his brief intellectual autobiography

reflects on the emergence of such efforts in a way that makes it possible to understand the logical trajectories of these transformations of anthropological inquiry. Whereas the 1970s saw a widespread rejection of materialism – the notion that the quantifiable and physical is causally prior to the subjective and experiential – the subsequent swing of the anthropological pendulum appears to have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. In Ingold's case, this is evident in his inattention to precisely those quantifiable and physical aspects of organisms and societies that were overly prominent in the agenda of cultural ecology. We all know that flows of energy and materials continue to be essential to both social and ecological systems, yet they are almost completely invisible in contemporary anthropological deliberations on society and nature. But being denied determinacy should not be tantamount to disappearance. To truly integrate the social and the natural would be to show how flows of energy and materials are *used* to generate social organization – that is, how human societal relations enlist non-human nature in the service of their own logic. That logic, I would emphasize, generally hinges on power and inequalities.

When Ingold abandoned cultural ecology, he recalls being persuaded by Sahlins' culturalist arguments and Godelier's Structural Marxism, but he does not mention the school of political ecology. Yet Wolf's (1972) challenge to cultural ecology founded the political ecology approach in anthropology, and the wide adoption of the latter reflected a widespread discontent with the local and adaptationist focus of the former school (Watts 2015). Although no less anchored in local case studies, a hallmark of political ecology is its constant awareness of global political economy. Wolf (1982) taught anthropologists to rethink cultural and ecological processes on all continents as consequences of economic and political processes at the level of the world-system. Political ecology showed us how to transcend the local and adaptationist outlook of cultural ecology but without abandoning materialism. It reframed the relation between society and nature by recognizing that 'society' over the past five centuries has been nothing less than global.

Ingold's concern with the experiential details of micro-level human engagement with the non-human environment seems a project far removed from tracing the trajectories of the world-system, but they are not unconnected. Although it would be unreasonable to request a single scholar to explore both these disparate aspects of human–environmental relations, I would be curious to know how Ingold conceives of the relation between world-system integration, on the one hand, and the historical transformations of experience, on the other. His recurrent focus on non-modern, non-industrial modes of engaging the environment suggests an implicit critique of industrial capitalism and the world market which spawned it, but rather than explicitly deploring the extensive shift from tools to machines – and from practical skill to abstract blueprints – he seems to ask us to rediscover a mode of experiencing the world that modernity has obscured from view. However, this immediately raises the question: can our loss of relatedness be distinguished from real-world processes of reification and objectification, and can an effort to rekindle relationism be pursued independently of a political confrontation with the social system that continues to transform relations into things? Like his predecessors in phenomenology, psychology, anthropology, and art, Ingold recognizes the profoundly meaningful realms of experience of which capitalist modernity tends to deprive us. He eloquently persuades us of what we have lost, but in order not to stop at nostalgia, his championing of relationism deserves occasionally to be connected to politics.

Politics are based on convictions about the character of the world. On reading his various texts, I recurrently ask myself whether Ingold subscribes to a realist or constructivist ontology. Are relationist accounts of human activity equally applicable to all social contexts, whether non-modern or modern, or does the modern treatment of the world as a collection of ‘blobs’ make the world – and humans – more blob-like? Ingold is explicitly critical of the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology, emphatically affirming that the world is *one*, but there are moments when his relationism verges on a relativist or even solipsist ontology. Does not his denial of an ‘objective’ reality ultimately imply an assertion of ontological diversity? An example of such ontological ambiguity is his suggestion, inspired by Goethe, that ‘the sun we perceive in the sky, and that lights the world of our experience, can *exist* only through its essential correspondence with the eye’ (Ingold 2015, 99; emphasis added). While I readily agree that, for social scientists, the relation between the knower and the known recursively contributes to shaping both, I cannot accept that the same observation applies to astronomy. There are what the critical realists call *intransitive* aspects of reality that exist independently of human cognition, and that require modifications of a general relationist approach to knowledge. While knowledge is always a relationship, some objects of knowledge remain completely resistant to the way in which they are conceived.

As already indicated, a central issue is what we mean by ‘society’ and ‘social.’ When Ingold in the 1970s and 1980s struggled to reconcile the dualist understanding of humans as social *and* ecological beings – persons *and* organisms – his concepts of ‘social’ appears to be based on the social organization of hunter-gatherers, referring to the ‘relations of food sharing and the division of labour between men and women’ (2018, 220). In this view, human society is a matrix of ‘personal’ relations. Ingold realized that person and organism in hunter-gatherer societies were indissolubly one and the same, and that the implications required a ‘completely different kind of thinking, one that starts not from populations of individuals but from fields of relations’ (2018, 221). But the social and ecological matrices of relations in which modern people are immersed are very different from those of hunter-gatherers. They are generally not local and personal but global and impersonal. They also involve the distribution of food and labour, but not so much through inter-personal sharing and collaboration as in the form of abstract commodity markets and international trade. The crucial difference between modern people and hunter-gatherers is thus that, for the former, the matrices of relations that constitute the organism and the person do *not* coincide. Physically and objectively, the molecules that compose our bodies tend to derive from the far-flung corners of the planet, but personally and subjectively, most of us remain embedded within a much more limited social matrix of relations. Even if modernity has radically transformed the scope of our social contexts, the scale of our economic and ecological reach far exceeds our subjective and experiential reach as persons.

Moreover, a political ecology approach cannot be content with a mycological or fungal metaphor for society, even if conceived as a global matrix. If the world-system has rhizomatic features, its myriad lines of relations must be recognized not merely as an invalidation of ‘blob’-like representations of nations or cities, but as conduits of *asymmetric* flows. While mutually constitutive of the nodes which they connect – generating and reinforcing core-periphery relations – those connections are not politically neutral but sources and means of capital accumulation. Fungal metaphors tend to obscure such power

asymmetries by emphasizing mutuality and connectivity at the expense of inequality and exploitation. It is thus tantalizing to discover, interspersed in Ingold's text, brief fragments of an explicit critique of capitalist modernity. I wish he had elaborated his assertion that anthropologists may 'side up to power and chip away at its pretensions' (2018, 216). What does 'power' mean here? Perhaps he refers to 'the colossal expansion, over the last four decades, of globalization and the political economy of neoliberalism' (2018, 217)? But what does he mean when he proposes that anthropology 'can help pave the way for sustainable futures' (2018, 225)? If the unsustainability of contemporary life is inherent in the outlook and discourse of neoliberalism, how can anthropology challenge it? Ingold's contempt for the commodification of science and for 'the neoliberal economy of knowledge' evokes a contradiction between a 'global scientific elite ... in collusion with the corporations it serves' and an 'increasingly impoverished' world population (2018, 226). I wholeheartedly share his campaign for care, responsibility, and truth, but to denounce the scientists is merely to chip away at the tip of the iceberg. While Ingold's anthropology persuasively reveals the dimensions of experience of which we have been deprived, the comparative horizons of anthropology can also be used to examine the submerged contours of the iceberg on which is founded not only science, but neoliberal power, unsustainability, and global impoverishment. At the root of all these evils are the very ideas of general-purpose money, the global market, and the progress of its technological offspring since the Industrial Revolution.

Ingold's (2000, ch.15–16) own analyses of the phenomenon of modern technology identifies its externality to the human body as a significant historical rupture, but its prerequisites are no less economic than cognitive or experiential. In his own words, 'technical relations have become progressively disembedded from social relations, leading eventually to the modern institutional separation of technology and society' (Ingold, 2000, 321–322). We shall indeed need to rethink the Nature-Society distinction in order to realize that machines may be instruments not just for putting Nature to work, but for putting other segments of global Society to work. The Industrial Revolution – and the history of technology ever after – certainly required engineering science, but it has been no less dependent on the asymmetric resource flows of the world-system. Because we tend to think of modern technology as revealed Nature, ontologically sequestered from the world market which is its prerequisite, the harnessing of inorganic energy in the first combustion engines has yet to be understood as a global societal event. Our conventional separation of economics (as the study of social exchange sequestered from Nature) and engineering (as contingent on market prices, yet conceived as the revelation of Nature) tends to obscure the increasingly obvious fact that economic growth and technological progress are inextricably connected euphemisms for exploitation. For more than two centuries, globalized market trade conceived as politically and morally neutral exchange has entailed the displacement of work and environmental loads from wealthier to poorer parts of the world-system. From the colonial slave plantations that supplied British factories with cotton fibre to the sugarcane plantations that now provide European cars with ethanol fuel, technological progress in the core has been founded on the appropriation of human time and natural space in the periphery. Against this background, it is ironic that the so-called 'material turn' in anthropology and other social sciences should be so completely divorced from the global political economy of material flows (c.f. Schandl et al. 2016).

Ingold's interest in identifying the specific characteristics of the phenomenon of modern technology is not incidental, as it defines the difference between the living and the non-living. I would add that it ultimately also bridges the analytical chasm between phenomenology and political ecology that troubles me. As I suggested in a review of *The Perception of the Environment* (Hornborg 2002), technology has provided a master trope for the distorted views of both culture and biology which Ingold so persistently criticizes. Machines are counterfeit organisms – inanimate replacements of living processes such as human labourers and draft animals. Marx's notion of 'dead labour' captures their zombie-like character, but does not sufficiently acknowledge the extent to which they depend on asymmetric social transfers of energy and other biophysical resources. Machines are strategies for harnessing physical forces and substances in Nature to reproduce power inequalities in Society, but are couched in the politically neutral idioms of economics and engineering. They are paradigmatically *socionatural* phenomena, but appear to our consciousness – viewed through the twin filters of economics and engineering – as sequestered from society and politics. Our civilization is committed not only to the illusion of producing machines that are more efficient at harnessing solar energy than living beings, but also to obscuring the exploitative foundations of technological progress. Ingold's fascination with the experience of being a living being has led him to identify what distinguishes a machine from an organism, but deserves to be elaborated into an even more profound – and subversive – philosophy of technology. More than ever, given current deliberations on cyborgs and artificial intelligence, we need to maintain a precise distinction between persons and things. But in this respect, I find Ingold's position ambiguous. In the essay to which we have been asked to respond, he explicitly asserts that for him, 'there are no objects' (2018, 224). But surely machines *are* objects? To the extent that we downplay the distinction between sentience and non-sentience (subjects and objects), we risk succumbing (like Latour and his followers) to fetishism – the attribution of animateness to non-living things.

In the sense that they are inanimate and non-sentient, machines are definitely objects. But if we follow Ingold in opposing objectivism to relationism, we must conclude that machines, too, are 'bundles of relations.' The functioning of a tractor is as dependent on inputs of fuel energy as the functioning of an organism is on inputs of nutrients. There are, as pointed out above, two ways in which an entity is contingent on its relational context: the phenomenological sense extensively explored by Ingold and applicable only to living beings, and the material or metabolic sense which living beings share with machines. It is the sequestration of economics and engineering that permits us to perceive machines as 'blobs' that exist independently of global exchange relations. This illustrates how disciplinary fragmentation fosters reification and fetishism. To promote a relationist perspective on living organisms as simultaneously sentient and material forms would require the kind of interdisciplinary synthesis of phenomenology, anthropology, and biology that Ingold has been articulating for decades, but complemented with attention to the flows of energy and matter in ecosystems that used to preoccupy cultural ecology. To promote a relationist perspective on technology, on the other hand, would require a synthesis of economic history, ecological economics, and political ecology. It would require us to ask, whenever deliberating on a new invention, to what extent it is merely a way of putting Nature to work, and to what extent it is a way of putting other segments of global Society to work. In other words, it would require us to acknowledge that

technologies are not just revelations of intrinsic properties of Nature, but *socionatural* phenomena which reflect the metabolic structures of world-systems.

Ingold (2018, 217) suggests that the modern abandonment of 'Goethean' ideals of close sensory familiarity with the objects of a scientist's attention should be seen as a surrender to neoliberalism, and that the best we can do to counter the commodification of science is to turn to art. While I am persuaded that some aspects of human-environmental relations are more effectively communicated through art than through prose, the ideal of close sensory familiarity or 'correspondence' with an object exposes the limitations of phenomenology, because no degree of sensory familiarity with a machine – and as a spare-time farmer, I speak from experience – will reveal the global field of relations of which it is a manifestation. A commitment to phenomenology can thus serve to obscure macro-level relations such as the structures of global political economy. To challenge 'globalisation and the political economy of neoliberalism' (Ingold, 2018, 217), which Ingold explicitly deplores, requires that we transcend Goethean ideals and address the logic of abstract systems such as the world market.

I believe that the dilemma which has propelled Ingold's pendulum movement ultimately boils down to the insidious way in which we tend to conceive of the distinction between the semiotic and the material – the subjective and the objective – as a *causal* relation. Ingold was as justified in abandoning the materialism of cultural ecology as he was in not simply adopting the opposite view that cultural representations are arbitrary semiotic systems that impose their autonomous logic on the organic and physical. His struggles to find a compromise between Rappaport and Sahlins have consistently sought to integrate the material and the experiential without positing either as somehow prior to the other, but as previously observed his phenomenological solution tends to leave some important questions unanswered. The experiential or subjective aspect of human-environmental relations necessarily implicates the continuous formation of cultural and discursive frameworks for conceptualizing and perceiving the world. Ontologies are produced not merely through individual engagement with the physical environment, but simultaneously through social processes of narration, categorization, and emulation. Such social processes of meaning formation define what we too unreflectingly tend to refer to as 'cultural construction.' Their tacit and sensory dimensions certainly deserve emphasis, but this should not entail completely jettisoning the significance of the linguistic and discursive. Whether hunter-gatherers articulating their experiences of the non-human environment or nineteenth-century Britons consolidating their outlook on industrialism and world trade, humans continuously generate ontologies which have material as well as sensory repercussions. Such ontologies are neither 'adaptations' to the environment or semiotic idiosyncrasies blindly imposing their autonomous trajectories on physical reality, but collectively negotiated human modes of relating to the world, responding to its materiality, and shaping human activity. Viewed as a process of continuous mediation of human-environmental relations, it would be as misleading to think of culture as determined by the environment as it would be to think of it as free to pursue its autonomous logic. As Ingold indicates, culture is not an 'add-on' to biology, but the human version of a universal semiotic capacity essential to all life. It is indissolubly part of our practical and material engagement with our environment.

What I would like Ingold to address is the increasingly conspicuous fact that the relation between semiotic and material aspects of human-environmental relations is

fundamentally transformed with globalization. In the modern world, the sphere of sensory engagement with artefacts and organisms does not coincide with the social conditions through which those artefacts and organisms are produced. Ingold's long-standing efforts to transcend dichotomies such as 'economic versus ecological, social versus natural, person versus individual' (2018, 221) are highly justified in the context of local groups of hunter-gatherers, but are not as applicable in the modern world-system. We have already observed that, rather than being 'indissolubly' one, the material derivation of the modern human organism tends to be geographically much more diffuse than that individual's constitution as a person. In similar ways, the operation of the world economy is disembedded from the destinies of particular ecosystems. The trajectories of our artefacts (such as money and technologies) and discourses (such as economics and engineering) have been detached from the sensory experience and the cognitive reach of individual humans. In this sense, modern ontology may seem free to pursue its own logic, but is continuously confronted with the material constraints of the biosphere within which it unfolds, as evidenced by our growing concerns with sustainability. The illusory emancipation from ecological constraints which pervades the modern outlook is a cognitive corollary of the physical displacement of environmental burdens to other continents. At the discursive level, at least, the fallacious character of this outlook is now widely acknowledged. At the practical level, a serious effort to implement policies for sustainability that transcend mere rhetoric would need to rewrite the rules of the global economic game so that it is no longer geared to neocolonial, asymmetric transfers of resources to world-system cores.

As a leading environmental anthropologist, Ingold can be expected to have substantial things to say on sustainability and environmental justice. Yet, when he mentions the Anthropocene (2018, 225), he endorses instead turning to art as a source of humility and 'radical ecological awareness.' He does not seem concerned with how issues of global justice and sustainability are intertwined. Even when he has discussed the weather (Ingold 2015, ch.11–15), I have found little to persuade me that phenomenology can help us combat climate change. Although immensely impressed with his eloquence and the scope of his erudition, I am left wondering how art and phenomenology can challenge the abstract logic of economics, engineering, and globalized capitalism.

I realize, of course, that these are not issues easily addressed on the basis of the premises that run through Ingold's rich and interdisciplinary project. His attention has focused on the kind of sensory relationism that can be applied to the immediate human engagement with the non-human, not on revealing that even machines, in a cognate way, are 'bundles of lines' rather than 'blobs.' But, as I indicated at the outset, his efforts to resurrect non-modern modes of existence and perception – and to celebrate (with D'Arcy Thompson) the diversity of biological and material forms – conveys an implicit but powerful critique of the forces which threaten such modes of being and such diversity. This is why I would encourage him to *explicitly* address how our modern ontology tends to undermine life itself, as an indissolubly semiotic and material phenomenon. The germ of such a line of inquiry can be found in his insight that the historical emergence of a concept of disembedded 'technology' is completely parallel to anthropological analyses of the emergence of the disembedded 'economy' (Ingold 1997, 108). This is to say that Ellul's (1964) insights on technology are cognate – and in fact concomitant – to Polanyi's (1944) on economy. Here is the very essence of modernity, the global and decontextualized abstractions of

which Ingold challenges with his pervasive focus on the local, concrete, and embedded. Given his rich understanding of ecology and the conditions of human experience, Ingold is very well placed to elaborate a critique of the simultaneously semiotic and material consequences of practices and discourses that disembed artefacts, landscapes, and not least *people* from bundles of relations that are local enough to be accessible to experience.

Tim Ingold's work poses a central conundrum to anthropology because it amounts to an ontological critique of modernity but without identifying power relations as a crucial aspect of that which is criticized. It is no coincidence, and no less tantalizing, that Ingold (1997, 2000) has been the leading proponent of an 'anthropology of technology', yet again without mentioning the political dimension of modern technology. I do not mean to emphasize the political aspects of technology because of a compulsion to see all human phenomena from a political perspective, but because power inequalities are inextricably *constitutive* of the machine. The relation between power inequalities and technology is an analytical and intellectual challenge, rather than just a matter of ideological perspective. To address the power aspect of technologies is not to 'politicize' essentially non-political concerns – as if societal phenomena could ever be viewed as politically neutral – but to penetrate their very essence. In other words, to view technology as a phenomenon that can be excised from relations of power inequalities is to fail to grasp its societal rationale: its requisites, its consequences, and the foundations of its very existence. To unravel the societal and ecological consequences of modern technology is fundamentally aligned with the general goal of political ecology to show how environmental issues and power relations are intertwined. I hope to have indicated some of the ways in which Ingold's critique of modernity can be elaborated into a very significant contribution to political ecology.

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