

On human-nature relations and how gender comes in: An interview with Veronica Strang

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Introduction

After the LOVA Workshop *Gender and Nature* on June 15th, 2018, at Radboud University Nijmegen I had the opportunity to interview Veronica Strang, the keynote speaker of that workshop. Not being familiar with her work and the research field of gender and nature but having knowledge of her book *What anthropologists do* of 2009, I researched the internet for the preparation of the interview and discovered that Strang published a lot of books, articles and other publications. In this report I will go into Strang's career and research interests, her focus on water and how she elaborated on gender in her research. In addition to the information from the interview and on the internet I also used information I found in the above mentioned book about Strang's career. I will end the report with some critical remarks on how she approaches gender in her work.



Veronica Strang. Photo by Jasmijn Rana

A variety of jobs and positions

Currently Veronica Strang is Executive Director of the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University, UK, a position she has held since 2012. Before coming to Durham she had a range of jobs. Strang told me that she did not start with anthropology in her early years. After her bachelor's studies in Design and Art History in Sheffield in the 1970s she "ran overseas to travel the world". In these years she worked mostly as a freelance writer in the UK, the Caribbean, Canada and Australia. In Canada one of her major clients was the Ontario Ministry of Environment, whom she assisted with their contributions to the Brundtland Report *Our Common Future* of the United Nations (1987). As she wanted to do something very different from desk work and to escape another long Canadian winter she left for Queensland, in the northeast of Australia. She had been there before, visiting friends and now she found work at a cattle station as a 'jillaroo' (a kind of cow girl). For a year she worked with white and Aboriginal colleagues in a stock team, mustering cattle, until a fall from a half-broken horse resulted in a broken arm. During her recovery period she spent a lot of time in the archives of the local Aboriginal community reading material written by anthropologists.

This inspired her so much that she decided to go back to the UK for doing a Master's in Anthropology. Her application at Oxford University was accepted, and after her Master's (1990-1991) she continued her studies by doing a PhD in Anthropology (DPhil, 1991-1994) under the supervision of Howard Morphy, then a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford who was doing research on Aboriginal people of northern Australia in collaboration with his wife Frances

Morphy. For her DPhil field research Strang went back to the Western Cape York area of Queensland where she had worked before. Her research compared the very different environmental relationships of Aboriginal language groups in Kowanyama and the pastoral communities in the cattle stations. Her dissertation, *Uncommon ground: Cultural landscapes and environmental values*, was published by Berg in 1997.

Since then Veronica Strang has continued working in the field of anthropology. First (1995-1997) by teaching at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology and the Pitt Rivers Museum in combination with a research appointment at the Environmental Change Unit of Oxford University, then (1997-2002) she worked at the University of Wales in Lampeter where she helped to establish a new Department of Anthropology. Aiming to continue her research in Queensland, she took up a post as Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Technology in Auckland, New Zealand (2002-2005). She was then offered a position as a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Auckland (2005-2012). From Auckland she could regularly go to Queensland for her research in the Western Cape York area. In 2009 she was invited as visiting Fellow for three months at the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University in the UK. She enjoyed the atmosphere of interdisciplinary research and reflexive debate very much, and that is why, in 2011, she agreed to return as the Executive Director of the Institute. However, Strang is still travelling a lot to Queensland and many other places in the world. Strang has been and still is active in various organisations. From 2013-2017 she served as the Chair of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the

Commonwealth and recently she was appointed to the Interdisciplinary Advisory Panel of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Focus on water in studying human-nature relations

Since her youth Strang has been interested in environmental issues: “When I was a little kid, I was writing poetry about how Man was wrecking the environment” and after her graduation much of her freelance writing work was about environmental problems and sustainability. When she worked in Canada for the preparation of the Brundtland Report, she became really involved: “This question came to my mind. Why do some people care and why do some not? And that question bugged me.” Working in Australia she found huge diversity in ideas about relationships with nature, and how people used the land, the water of the local Mitchell River and other natural resources.

“So that was a very interesting year. Why do these Aboriginal people care so much about their land and the whites do not. And then I had an idea, I’ll do a Master’s course and see if I could get an answer to that question. Then, of course, I realised that it was a much larger question than I had imagined, and much more interesting.”

During her DPhil field research:

“I was finally seduced by having the toolkit for understanding things that anthropology provides. There is nothing like it. And so, yes, I just fell down the

slippery slope into academic life. And it wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t broken my arm.”

After her doctoral research Strang undertook a long series of research projects, on her own and in collaboration with others. She focused on the relations of humans with their natural environment and how this is interconnected with social and cultural constructions:

“The issues of social justice between groups of people and the issues of ecological justice are very closely linked. And this is why I am interested in non-human rights, because in many cases injustice is all about the misuse of power and you get this huge disparity which is not only between European settlers and indigenous people, but also between the colonial settlers and the non-human species.”

Quite soon Strang discovered the centrality of water. In Queensland it was the water of the Mitchell River:

“It was so central to people’s lives. Water is the most wonderful mirror of people’s environmental values because it very much reflects the choices they make about what they think is important; water reflects the priorities people have. It is a very good focus; if you have the water places you have control. To control water is having political power and this is why I am very interested in who owns the water, how decisions are made about it.”

So, Strang did a lot of research in this field:

“The other thing about water is that you can work on any aspect of it. You can focus on political power, ownership, property, management and it is very central. But there is also the wonderful spiritual and cultural stuff that I was talking about today. So, there is a whole spectrum of ways of thinking about water; all of which are very interesting. So you never get bored.”

Working at the Institute of Advanced Study at Durham University left Strang with little time for field research, as she is involved in organizing interdisciplinary meetings and debates about a variety of themes and topics with scholars from all over the world. For her own research she is re-theorising on human-environment relations in river catchment areas and on concepts of sustainability in a project called *Re-Imagined Communities*. In 2017 she assisted the United Nations in developing new *Principles for Water* to complement its Sustainability Goals. She is currently involved in several projects on water infrastructure, including an international (US-UK) collaboration between anthropologists and engineers. And last but not least she is preparing a book examining historical and contemporary beliefs about water beings worldwide, the topic she elaborated on during her keynote speech at the LOVA Workshop of June 15th, 2018. She hopes to finish a draft text before the end of her current research leave from the Institute of Advanced Study in early 2019.

In addition to all the research regarding human-nature/water relations, Strang also wrote the book *What*

anthropologists do, which was published in 2009 by Berg on the initiative of Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth. People were

“... worrying about the recruitment into anthropology. There were enough students interested in it, but their parents always asked how they would get a job. And then you have all the stereotypes: that you are going to the jungle; that it is going to be dangerous; that you will never get a job when you come home. So, for years we said to each other: somebody has to write a book that is for school leavers, and then I was persuaded to do it. The intention of the book was to take anthropology to careers offices in schools. But in fact it has been taken up in first year courses of anthropology where students are still thinking about what kind of career they want. But it is also meant for people who are not anthropologists, policy makers and the like who do not know what anthropologists actually do. And how they do it.”

Recently Strang agreed to revise and update the book.

How gender comes in

While preparing the interview I discovered that Strang’s work does not focus directly on gender issues very often. However, there are some publications with gender or women in the title, and gender issues do recur fairly regularly in relation to her main focus on human-environmental relations. Strang agreed in the interview that she did not write that much about gender.

“Part of that was because of my resistance to the idea that women anthropologists have to write about gender; but I was always interested in it. I have done quite a lot of stuff in gender and material culture. I am very interested in things like homologues and how objects reflect gender and I did do some research about masculinity. Instead of writing about women I wrote about men, because I had been working with these young stockmen in Australia.”

Further on in the interview Strang said:

“I have always been a committed feminist. I used to participate in the ‘Take Back the Night’ marches when I was 17 and all that stuff. I was always committed to equality, but it ties in with notions of social and ecological justice. I am interested in the question that also came up today: that is ‘can we have ecological justice without social equality?’ And I think that this is a really interesting question. I am not sure we can. I think if we don’t get away from very hierarchical ways of thinking neither of these problems is going to get solved. If we don’t think reciprocally, if we don’t think collectively, if we don’t think in terms of the other and their needs and interests we are not going to solve gender disparity, and we are not going to solve sustainability issues.”

During Strang’s keynote lecture at the LOVA Workshop I was wondering why Strang used only the term human and never spoke about the gender difference, of women and men, or

females and males regarding their relations with the natural environment and resources. In the interview I asked her about that and we had an interesting discussion. The first point Strang made was that the gender division of females and males is based on a dichotomy which is quite an ethnocentric European idea. She referred to several cultures in the world with more than only two gender categories, like among various native American groups. The second more important argument Strang brought up was that she preferred to talk about humans and not use gender categories because:

“I think there is a continuum: that we are all somewhere on a spectrum of gender characteristics ... most people are clustered on one side or the other side but they are not separate. There are elements of both in everybody and some people just sit closer to the middle. I don’t understand why there is so much anxiety about gender categories. There is so much variety and diversity. The male-female categorization is a very powerful binary which we probably could do better without in some ways!”

Strang made a plea for rejecting thinking in binaries and dichotomies:

“If we stopped binary thinking and thought in terms of a fluid continuum, it would make so much more sense in terms of the reality and the complexity of people’s lives. And we would not be boxing them into ‘this is what a woman is really supposed to do’ and ‘what a man is supposed to do’.”

Strang illustrated some of the problems with fixed gender binaries with findings from her research among the white stockmen in the Australian outback of Western Cape York area of Queensland. She noted how difficult the dominant masculinity construction sometimes was for these men:

“Because you realise how much pressure men come into to do the bush bashing, brutal stuff. They have to perform very extreme ideas about masculinity. I became much more sympathetic to the difficulties these young stockmen face in how to be a man, they have these extreme stereotypes: that they have to be anti women; they have to be racist; they have to be homophobic; they have to be tough; they are not allowed to cry. All these very constraining ideas are extreme in the Australian outback.”

Strang acknowledges there are difficulties linked with a fluid perspective on gender:

“People tend to prefer categories that are clear. This is going straight back to Mary Douglas: if something is ambiguous, then there is something wrong. It is the same with transgender issues. The anxiety level is very high because there is no comfortable categorization; cognitive processes tend to encourage binary thinking. It is a genuine problem for people to encompass something that is ambiguous. But we do have choices. The big advantage that humans have above non-humans is our reflective capacity to talk about how we think.”

Although Strang mentioned her preference for not using the gender binary I did ask her at the end of the interview to comment on Sherry Ortner’s seminal feminist anthropological article of 1974 *Is female to male as nature is to culture?* which had been so very stimulating for me when I was a young student in the 1970s. Strang acknowledged the importance of Ortner’s ideas and her arguments for a confirming answer at the time of writing:

“I think that Sherry Ortner was right that in our dominant discourses the association between women and nature is very powerful at deep historical ways; you can go right back to medieval Christianity and its abhorrence of the flesh, the body, or any kind of sexuality, and the idea that humans had to be lifted above animals. The notion of human nature had to be overcome with purity, and reason. We tend to look at these things as being tied to religion. But actually they co-emerged with a set of ideas about rationality, reason, the mind. And these contributed to the separation between the mind and the body, and the male and the female, and culture and nature.”

Strang stated that using such dualistic categories is not productive, because: “It ‘others’ nature ... and to undo that we have to challenge such dualism very explicitly”. She thinks that in the discourses about ecological justice a repositioning of humankind is needed, so that humans are not seen as being separated from nature.

“So, all that new work on new materialism and understanding the dynamic interrelationalities is all about repositioning humankind within the world, challenging the notion of nature as an object that we act upon. It is something we live within, and that is why I mentioned the connectivity of water because water is intellectually imaginative: we understand that each living organism is connected by flow.”

A critical concluding remark

Strang’s argument for questioning the binaries of culture and nature and the separation of humans and their environment in the discourse for more ecological justice and a sustainable earth is really important. However, I do not agree with her critique of gender categories. Although her idea of a spectrum of gender characteristics is challenging, I do not think that it will work that way. I acknowledge that there are various cultures in the world with less strict dichotomous gender categories than we have in westernized societies, or with more than two gender categories. However, in the idea of the spectrum there is still a dichotomy with masculinity or masculinities at the one end of the continuum and femininity or femininities at the other end. And we have dominant cultural constructions in all societies that link human bodies with gender characteristics, even when there are more than only feminine and masculine characteristics. Instead of erasing the physical and cultural gender divide or divisions among humans, I would prefer to bring in the importance of equal evaluation and social equality of the various gender characteristics, binary or multiple. Then the hierarchy between masculine and feminine (and other categories in multiple

gender constructions) that exists now in all known cultures could be overcome. The aspect of gendered inequality between humans, interconnected with so many other inequalities, should not be disregarded but always be taken into account. Even in discussions about ecological justice and human-nature relations.