

“History as Renegade Politics”

Interview with Ann Laura Stoler, 19-05-2016 in Leiden

We would like to go back to the year when you started your studies as a student. What were your plans and dreams for the future back then?

I'm not really sure that I ever thought in terms of plans and dreams. As for so many of my generation, what dominated the air around us was the war in Vietnam. The war saturated our imagination and even if one wasn't hugely political, we were all in this place where we agreed that we shouldn't be in Vietnam long before a large majority of the country turned against it. We marched, we attended rallies, we had study groups, we got arrested, and we marched again not really sure where to go. The war changed my reading habits from the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Robinson Jeffers to Lenin, Marx, and Rosa Luxemburg --all seemed so relevant to the imperial order of things though I wasn't quite sure what to do with what they said. Unlike our teachers whose Marxism had to be tempered, we wore our strident Marxism and political protest as a badge of honor—McCarthyism of the 1950s was far away. Within that environment, pursuing a “profession” was never really on my radar. I imagined that there were things I had to study, needed to do, and being an anthropologist seemed to offer the most license and fewest restrictions. In fact it seemed implicitly to endorse, while not itself subscribing, to what I thought mattered- some incipient critique of a politics of knowledge that was animated by what I was then learning about U.S. counterinsurgency and “strategic hamlet” studies in Thailand, project Camelot, U.S. AID programs that promoted themselves as reaching “the poorest of the poor” and that invariably --with respect to the Green Revolution in Java,-- not surprisingly advantaged the rich.

It was feminist politics and Marxist categories that seemed to guide my way. From my junior year as an undergraduate at Barnard, taking grad seminars at Columbia, the subjects of my papers ranged from class politics in the history of Ireland to the rural roots of the Chinese revolution for my undergrad thesis. In winter 1972 I went to Java, imagining I would study the effects of the “green revolution” on rural women (however absurd that seems in retrospect since I couldn't speak Javanese and had only the most rudimentary market Indonesian to go on) and to visit my then partner, Ben White, for what I thought was a brief interlude before starting graduate school at Berkeley in Chinese studies. I was taken with Java- put off grad school, married Ben in Singapore, and studied everything and anything (gleaning and rice harvesting, the meagre items women exchanged in small scale trade, house gardens, arduous palm sugar production, cassava consumption in homes where rice was a luxury they could not afford) about how landless families in the central Javanese village where we lived survived during those years. It was ethnography and the making of inequalities I was after and jointly Ben and I sought to dispel Clifford Geertz's distorted fiction of “shared poverty” as the prevailing condition of the rural poor.

When I finally returned to New York and to Columbia University's Anthropology Department in 1974, I read more political economy and history than anthropology and knew I wanted to study what colonial capitalism had carved out on the ground --which is how I ended up living with Javanese plantation workers in North Sumatra between 1977-1978. I didn't yet know how much of that “village” land had been seized from the estates by those in the squatter movement in the 1950s. What I did know is that alleged communist labor union members of Sarbupri were killed by the thousands. Over a decade after 1965, fear was still palpably in the air.

How did you go from your work on the labour movement and the political economy to the colonial system?

Doing history always seemed to me to be a subversive act and a renegade politics in a discipline once so committed to the “ethnographic present.” I learned Dutch by avidly reading about the colonial history of Deli before I arrived and it didn’t take long for me to realize how much of the topography, the system of labor recruitment, the very infrastructure and administrative apparatus were deeply embedded in colonial systems of coercion, persuasion, and control. Recruitment was gendered as were the pay scales, and in the history of plantation “development,” sexual politics was key. The contemporary social ecology of North Sumatra was sedimented with colonial relations, multinational monocrop priorities, and gendered labor policies that were not mere leftovers. As we’ve learned since, in the ever expanding and destructive palm oil industry, gendered pay scales and policies that condoned or condemned family labor recruitment -- depending on the moment—were fundamental to agribusiness strategies and have not gone away.

After fieldwork, I ended up in Amsterdam with my partner Larry Hirschfeld (Ben and I had decided that conjugality wasn’t for us) who Claude Levi-Strauss invited to work with him in Paris. Maurice Godelier, a prominent Marxist anthropologist, invited me to join his seminar and I settled in Paris to agonize through my dissertation with migraines, despair, and bursts of excitement. It was a pretty arid place for someone studying Indonesia and multinationals but help came from unexpected quarters: I met Jacques Leclerc, probably one of the most knowledgeable researchers on Indonesia’s left and labor movements, and through him a circle of Indonesian leftists who themselves or their parents had been in China in 1965 and were stuck there until some made their way to Europe. Both they and Jacques taught me so much and it was they who procured an invitation for me to visit and interview the score of Indonesian left activists who were still exiled in China, about the early years of the labor movement.

There were already two trajectories to my work: one was about “subaltern” politics and our knowledge practices; the other one deeply historical that kept me traveling back and forth to the Hague and Amsterdam and Leiden from Paris to work at the KIT [the library of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam], to the KITLV in Leiden, and to the archives in The Hague. I was frustrated by what I couldn’t find but utterly taken by what was there, and more than ever amazed by what Dutch historians seemed to so assiduously circumvent and dismiss-- but could not have missed. I was just starting to read Foucault then, *The History of Sexuality* came out in 1976, and in 1978 Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Both hit like bolts of recognition, making sense of what I was already writing! Feminist friends in England looked askance at -- and questioned -- my referencing Foucault. I remember responding defiantly (and probably defensively) that gender was different than the history of sexuality and as feminists we better know it. I realized I had probably stayed away from the U.S. too long when I was cycling in Amsterdam to the KIT one day in the opposite direction of a protest march and didn’t know what it was about. I stayed in Paris until 1983 and then took my first job at the University of Wisconsin, my first encounter with teaching, the politics of scholarship, and the great Midwest.

From how you describe this, it seems that the course of your career was merely decided by the people you met. Were they *that* influential?

It’s interesting that you say that. To have “influence” is a word that Foucault reminds us hides and I would argue steals meaning from the practices that make it up. I’d say that those places where I hadn’t expected to go were provocations that compelled me to do something in a way I might not have otherwise, caught me productively off precarious balance, and exposed me to the vulnerabilities of operating on unfamiliar terrain. When I first arrived in Paris in 1979 I was terrified to buy a tomato: now I love lecturing in French because something different happens that is beyond mere translation. I actually find myself saying things in ways that think I could not

have quite said with the same force in English. So it is true in a sense that people who have entered my life have graced and shaped its course: my sister first and foremost, When I was in graduate school one of my fellow students was married to an historian whose Marxism was in his bones. I would plant myself in the grim hallway of their apartment reading Marx until they politely kicked me out. Sure I would have and could have read those books elsewhere but there was something about being utterly surrounded in a labor and protest literature and talking with someone who cared so much about it, that probably held me differently than it would have otherwise and elsewhere.

The interviews I did in China with such vibrant former Indonesian political activists stayed with me as well. One of the first questions they asked me (I was 32 at the time) was about my children which I didn't yet have. But how can you be part of a revolution without children? I was baffled and retorted that you can't have time for children if you're doing political work. They laughed at my stubbornness and naiveté. I was starting my first job in Madison Wisconsin several months later and had my first child on the first day of classes the following year!

Choices were to be made. As I realized I couldn't write about the people I interviewed (many with close family still in Indonesia), I set aside those days and hours of interviews among an underground Indonesian old left and those still in China. We still don't have an account of that rich history of left labor activism and cultural creativity in "postcolonial" Indonesia of the 1950s... Many thought Ruth McVey would write it, was writing it, maybe we were all just hoping she would. I don't know. It's a history that waits to be done, not to be written as part of an inevitable teleology leading to 1965 but as it was lived during those Bandung years of imagined possibilities.

When you were in this sort of developing stage of your career, did you still consider yourself an anthropologist? Was that important to you?

I never identified with the discipline but it offered a pass that allowed room for Marx as much as Foucault. I got my first job in Madison (1983) despite doing "too much" history; Seven years later, I was courted at The University of Michigan precisely because this was one consolidating moment in which the synergy between history and anthropology took hold. A group of us hybrids fashioned one of the most exciting joint Ph.D. programs in the two disciplines, recruited fabulous students and produced a new generation of wondrous young scholars.

I left Ann Arbor in 2003 for the New School for Social Research in New York, where I imagined a philosophically inflected critical scholarship with a different bite and edge. My work has been nourished by being in New York (where I was born) and by the environment that the New School faculty and its eclectic graduate student body offer.

Your story is very much about being open to people, but also to disciplines. You would never stick to one discipline, you prefer history but in fact you were not choosing.

I care about disciplined, careful work, but not about disciplines in anyway. My most enabling interlocutors are philosophers, students of literature, law, geography, architecture, and political theory. Historians would say: fascinating study you did of the archives...for an anthropologist. Anthropologists would say: fascinating history you're doing but it's not anthropology. Neither thought I was doing what they were. I probably cultivated that stance more than I realized at the time, knowing then that if certain rules were ignored, I had better do what I was doing with sufficient breadth and depth, with transparency, with vigilance --and well.

To me it seems a very brave thing to do, to not be part of something, but it seems you were feeling comfortable in not fitting in. I get the feeling, the word 'renegade' is a very good word.

I think it was probably more brazen than brave. Those connections were energizing, especially those that were counter-intuitive and not considered the proper "cases" for comparison. Virginia Dominquez, a thoughtful and now eminent anthropologist, once called an essay of mine on "racial regimes of truth" "gutsy"—and I've often wondered what that actually meant and what about the venture seemed. I think there was something disturbing to me and my readers about the ways in which the racialized domains of knowledge-production in which I was working crumple in my hands—the historiography on racism was folded through the meanings given to race; discrete categories of scholarship and social practice collapsed into one another, recursively producing racial fictions and mythologies of racism's origins. I love the kind of work that resists one's intrusions, and seek to rough up smooth ground and smooth passage.

That's obvious from every text you've written. You're kind of part of it. You're so in the text. I have never read anything that's written the way you write. You developed your own language. I wonder how that developed?

I love the writing, not only what you say but how you say it. I write for content and clarity, but for tone and timber as well. I want the writing to be so compelling, that you have to attend to it even if it's not what you wanted to hear.

Do you still feel that way?

More than ever and in ways I might not have dared to do as a younger scholar. The politics of knowledge remains one of my bottom lines: how you teach, what you teach, what you write, what counts as a "source," what is deemed credible and trustworthy or not. Relations of power course through the presences and absences in what we write and how it matters.

Have you ever considered to fight for your causes outside of academia? Why is academia the right channel for you to disseminate your thoughts?

You have to do what compels you, stirs you into sleepless nights, then gets you –however reluctantly- there to your desk the next day. When I was writing *Race and the Education of Desire* in 1993, I would get dressed in the morning and put on my boots before sitting at my desk: one day I sat down and inadvertently started searching for something behind me, my arms hitting up against the back of my chair. Do you know what I was doing? Looking for my seat belt, to hear the click that it was secure, and then take off! There's not much more to say on that score- or so much. It was lift off and I was excited.

But you were asking about other channels. I've taught in a maximum security prison, loved it and would do that again- I've participated in art installations at museums and found that wanting. I've marched in Washington, been tear-gassed in Palestine, put in prison (overnight) in New York. I'm not sure these are any more effective ways of speaking out. I suppose it depends on how one thinks about action and practice. I don't like meetings. I would not be up to the day to day endurance that organizing entails.

You don't like the environment of being an activist. But still, you want your political message to be heard. Do you remember the first time or the times when you were receiving the most resistance to your work? When did your work provoke people and how did you deal with that?

It was probably in 1976 when I published my first article as a grad student in the feminist journal *Signs*. It opened with a provocation that “class was analytically prior to gender” with respect to agrarian reforms in Java. I was responding to what I saw as a pernicious focus of development agencies on “the role of women in x” that seemed to me at the time to deflect attention from the broader pacifying politics of development aid. But there wasn’t really “resistance” to the work so much as surprise, and from others a resounding affirmation.

For in fact, I’m not of the feminist generation that bore the worst brunt of exclusion and attack. That was more forcefully the case for a generation earlier. I had no trouble publishing. When I was in Madison, a stolid World Bank consultant on the faculty criticized my work for being “political” and not “scholarly” and with avuncular largesse counselled me to cease the former if I wanted tenure. Clifford Geertz was to agree as he wrote in my tenure promotion letter: It is not that she should not get tenure now, he wrote, she should never get it. His letter was dismissed as *ad feminem* but it certainly said something about Geertz’s willingness to skewer a young woman academic on the grounds that the work was again “political,” not “serious” and not “scholarly.” I’m sure there are many other instances about which I don’t know; in the Netherlands, the silence was sometimes deafening.

For me *Carnal Knowledge* and also *Race and the Education of Desire* were total eye-openers as a young student. But here in The Netherlands it was considered so out of the box. Would ignoring someone’s work also count as a way to resist it? I sometimes feel that is what happens to your work in The Netherlands

There is rumor that Leiden’s colonial historians would prefer that Stoler’s work not be followed, barely cited, and better not mentioned at all. *Race and the Education of Desire*, a book very much about Dutch colonial history, has never been reviewed in the Netherlands, nor has *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* as far as I know...strange when both have been reviewed in so many other places and translated into other languages across the globe.

How do you look at *Race and the Education of Desire* yourself?

It was a project that took me on a journey I had not thought to go...it grew out of a new seminar I was teaching in 1991, began as an essay but was more than anything a puzzle that I was compelled to figure out: how Foucault could write about sexuality and not about race, and then race but only loosely tied to sexuality and how could he write about both with colonialism and empire so utterly effaced? His 1976 lectures at the College de France were startling to me and the project of tracking his insights and those moves he chose not to make...It was with a passion that I tracked the appearance of race on the scratchy recordings at the Saulchoir library where his archive and recordings were stashed. But there was also something uncanny in that venture: that twisted helix of race and sexuality was already emerging from the Dutch colonial archives and my own treatment of those occlusions in historiography. *Race and the Education of Desire* traced those convergences, opening the possibility of thinking and writing differently about practices that were seen to be so utterly distinct in metropole and colony –and where the political had no place. Fred Cooper and I were simultaneously finishing up *Tensions of Empire* (1997) and I had already done the archival work for and written “In Cold Blood” on “hierarchies of credibility” in colonial Sumatra (1992) that in a later rendition was one of the final chapters of *Along the Archival Grain* (2009). I suppose it’s superfluous to say that there has never been anything linear about my writing. Problematics reappear at new moments, “knowledge-things” emerge at new sites to work though differently again.

Why specifically do you think *Race and the Education of Desire* is so barely received in the Netherlands?

It was dismissed as “about Foucault” for those who neither read nor cared to read him. *Homo academicus* as we know is *homo hierarchus* in the Netherlands and perhaps it not surprising that junior scholars who might have thought to engage the actual substance of the work, did not or did not acknowledge doing so. It was only when *Along the Archival Grain* came out that the work the Netherlands Indies as a racial formation was marginally engaged. But then I don’t write for a Dutch academic audience of a certain generation. I write across connections that seem not to be made because they puzzle me and I want to figure out what impasses make some ways of thinking more accessible than others.

You refuse to be part of one single group or discipline. On the other hand you called yourself a Foucaultian yesterday during the lecture you gave.

I rarely do that and laughed (at myself) when I did yesterday. I still read Foucault avidly as I do so many other philosophers, historians of science, and literary scholars but it is Foucault who confirms my own sense that philosophy needs history, that “fieldwork in philosophy” is a political and historical project and that writing history is a political act. Foucault, Gaston Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty, Judith Butler scramble what I thought and think I know over and again. I read for those striking moments of eruption, disruption, and disintegration.

Is this the reason you decided to establish the Institute for Critical Social Inquiry (ICSI) at the New School for Social Research in New York?

The ICSI is more than a labor of love: I wanted to create a space where it was possible to learn about what you felt you should already have known- whether that be the work of Fanon, Hegel or Marx and to learn about how to think those thinkers today with “masters” who had taught and studied those thinkers for years and then to come together with fellows from all over the world to think those thinkers differently again. It’s been a wondrous set of occasions the last two years and imagine that the third (with David Harvey, Anthony Appiah, and Michael Taussig) will be as well.

You’ve told us how you see history as your political act, and this seems to be your focus now, but if you had, say, three months right now without obligations and you were given the choice to go to an archive. Which archive would you go to and why?

That’s a hard question since I rarely know in advance where I want to get or go. I know that I want to write about the politics of sentiment in a different register, that I want to explore what it would mean to pursue what I set out as a challenge at the end of *Along the Archival Grain*, writing history in a “minor key,” or what Ralph Ellison saw as “the lower frequencies” of human experience...the new book, *Duress*, takes it measure from that, but I still have a long way to go.

Where do you get your awareness for language from? Does it have anything to do with your early study of Japanese? Or with the way your family interacts with language? How does this develop in a person?

Insecurity, perhaps...doubting what I know and how to know it. My sister was a terrifying presence and inspiration. I tend to write aloud, I want to hear the lilt of a sentence, the cadence

of a word. These are not distractions or embellishments; there is analytic content not only in form as Hayden White would have it, but in writerly style. This is no screen of deception as those who condemned the sophists would have it, rather an effort to capture the very ambiguities, brutalities, and pleasures that language affords. I'm taken with George Steiner's notion that philosophy is the poetry of thought, and that concepts are the potential poetry of philosophy as Giorgio Agamben has put it. There is conceptual labor in the language, the images, the metaphoric weight we can bring to questions that matter –in our prose.

How does the writing itself interact with the development of your thinking into book projects?

Writing is not for me putting something down that has already gelled. Outlines have always paralyzed me. Writing is an exercise in limits and extensions, of small victories and failures to touch, to get close to what you think you want to say –and then in the writing something kaleidoscopic can happen: the affirmative turns into a question, the assertion into its opposite, the figure and ground are suddenly inverted and you are humbled, and lose any sense of total control.

All of my books loop back on one another. As I said earlier there is nothing linear, no trajectory outlined in advance. My points of entry are usually very small, puzzling moments, jarring turns of phrase, minor incisions that stand out as what Roland Barthes would refer to as a 'punctum' with respect to photography, but that I try to remain alert to on an archival page. Abstractions offer no inspiration, they are limpid, produce pallid insights and pallid prose.

Do you know what lies ahead for you? Do you have one or two big issues left that you feel you want to be working with in the next years? Do you have a plan or is it completely open?

Yes in some minor way; No, in the grand scheme of life choices. I fear becoming soft around the edges, slipping from the quest for an "ethics of discomfort" unknowingly, fearless speech receding as a goal. Each of these has probably pushed my work to more explicitly engage the present and the confounding temporalities of it: colonialism in the raw in Palestine, a politics of sentiment that pervades the assessment of remorse, death penalties and the recesses of the law today, the "taste" (and distaste) of racisms colluding and in collision with what it means to be French in France today.

To return one last time to what you are doing at the moment, why is it now Law that you are working on?

In many ways, it is where I began: I was intrigued nearly thirty years ago by how much mixed marriage regulations needed and butted up against international law, *intergentieel recht* [study of the application of (international) law within one state in which each population group lived according to its own laws and normative orders, term introduced by *adat* law professor Cornelis van Vollenhoven, red.], and how deeply international law was entwined with the making and securing of imperial concerns and the distinctions that were their supports and on which they would depend. Dutch colonial legal texts contain more 'ethnographic' detail than most colonial texts designed to do so. But more striking is how much "feeling" and "sentiments" (inappropriately directed or properly displayed) permeate those legal documents. Law is where sentiment harbors a commanding force. Not in the histrionics of trial soliloquys or in the theatrics of *Law and Order* reruns, but deeply in a moral economy of retribution and remorse, repentance and vengeance, the affective scaffolding on which the law's claims to dispassion, rules and rigid non-partisan rulings operate so inequitably, securing the resilience of racial formations today. Foucault did not turn away from law as a site of rule as is so often thought but

rather sought to show its powerful diffusion. What he did not do is offer what seemed to be a promise when he argued in 1972 that every sentiment has a history. Whether there is an affective analytics, or the potentiality for one, in Foucault's treatment of subjugation, subjectivity, the care of the self and the coercion of the other is a subject I'm grappling with in my work today.

Thank you so much professor Stoler, for your time and openness. We are delighted that we were able to talk with you about your work and life. We are looking forward to your new book coming out and to your future projects as well.