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Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 19 January 2018



Tylor Roundtable

Podcast with **Graham Harvey, Liam T. Sutherland, Paul-Francois Tremlett, Jonathon Jong, James L. Cox and Miguel Astor-Aguilera** (22 January 2018).

Chaired by **Graham Harvey**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/tylor-roundtable/>

Graham Harvey (GH): So this is the Roundtable for our discussion of [Edward Tylor](#) for the anniversary of his death, 100 year commemoration. And including myself, we have contributors to this book: [Edward Tylor: Religion and Culture](#). Paul, you had a suggestion for what we should do first?

Paul-Francois Tremlett (PT): I did. My suggestion, as a point of departure, was thinking about this Tylor project as part of a wider question about our relationship to classical theory. And I just thought that might be a nice place to begin. What do we do with early scholarship in Anthropology of Religion/Sociology/Religious Studies, etc? And what's our relationship to it?

GH: OK, would you like to show us how that's done?

PT: Well, I don't think it's a question of showing you how it's done. But for me anyway, being involved in this project made me read Tylor in a different way. I'd been used to particular kind of accounts of Tylor's work in secondary literature. I'd been used to allowing those works to direct me to [Primitive Culture](#) and a couple of other things that Tylor wrote. And my Tylor, as it were, was framed by that secondary literature. For this project I read *Primitive Culture*, two volumes, and a couple of other books- the book [Anthropology](#), a few articles. And I started to get a sense that there were other Tylors, apart from the sort of canonical account. And I found it a really refreshing process. At the same time as doing that, I was actually involved in a slightly different project which meant that I was also reading [The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life](#), by [Emile Durkheim](#). And I was reading that – also from cover to cover – and a few other things by Durkheim. And I started to get a very different

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picture of the kinds of conversations taking place between scholars at the end of the 19th, early 20th century. And it changed my relationship with that theory, and I think I got a hell of a lot out of it, frankly. And I'd thoroughly recommend it to others: read that material. Yes, of course you need the secondary literature – it's there for a reason and it's helpful – but at the same time you also need to de-familiarise yourself, and go through the texts as freshly as possible.

GH: It was also interesting, as well as doing some of that re-reading – I wouldn't say I've read both the volumes and all the other work – but reading more of Tylor, but also reading other people's work as we were editing the book. And being pointed to other parts to look up, and thinking, “OK, so that enriches my understanding of what he was trying to do, and the data he was using and the way he used it.” But also, it's been interesting . . . A lot of the chapters in the book do this comparative thing – as Jim's does, and as mine does and other people's do – to think about Tylor's practice and his argument alongside other peoples, and to see that. So that, too, was quite an interesting experience: seeing selective reading, sometimes, by other people and thinking how our theories and work arises out of these interesting conversations.

[Liam Sutherland](#) (LS): Well, I mean, I came at this very much from a different stage in my career, because I looked at the relationship between modern theory and EB Tylor for my Master's project. So this really came out from my undergraduate exposure to Theory and Method, which was one of the elements I found the most interesting. But I was quite fascinated with the bits of Tylor that had been presented. But it was very much – as Paul has touched on – in a very kind of codified, boxed in way. But I thought there was a lot of explanatory potential there, so I wanted to go back and pursue this at a deeper level with my Master's. And I think it was when I actually, really had to get to grips with this, with the primary sources, with the two volumes of *Primitive Culture*, (5:00) that it really became apparent to me, sort-of really just how much can be lost without necessarily being wrong. It's not – as we touch on in the book – it's not necessarily the case that the canonical Tylor, as we've called it, is completely, is an inaccurate depiction; it's a limited one, and perhaps a necessarily limited one. But it's the fact that when you go and read the primary sources in context, it's quite a different experience. And sometimes the kind of voice, the nuances, and the humanity of some of the early scholars that you look at can really get lost; that they're actually far more persuasive, especially in their own context, than we actually give credit for. So, as much as my particular focus has been Tylor, I hope that I've at least internalised these lessons. So that with other key theorists that I'm only dimly aware of, or that I'm only aware of the canonical version of, that I might already begin to suspect that there's more to the

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picture that I'm missing, and at least try to look for that in future.

[Jonathan Jong](#) (JJ): So Liam, you discovered Tylor during your undergraduate studies,

LS: Yes.

JJ: . . . which is to say that your lecturers put him on the reading list, right?

LS: Yes, that's true.

JJ: And for that reason, I think, it's kind of surprising that we are surprised that we get a lot out of reading Tylor. Because we must have known this at some level, assuming- I don't do this kind of work – but, like, the rest of you around this table presumably assign Tylor. So why do you do that?

GH: No, I haven't.

[Miguel Astor-Aguilera](#) (MAA): I assign him, but it's in the same manor that it was when I was in graduate school in seminars: little snippets. Nobody assigned a complete work of Tylor, [Malinowski](#) or [Evans-Pritchard](#), or [Frazer](#). Oftentimes they wind up in readers where: “This is what they meant, so that's what you get.” So this is one of the fantastic things about not only being in the volume, but it's also, as you mentioned, going in and actually reading exactly what he said, which makes a world of difference.

JJ: But what motivates people who design syllabi to put the classical – even if snippets of the classical texts – what motivates people who construct these syllabi to put them there in the first place? Is it for historical interest? Do scholars like yourselves think that there is something of value for today? How does it come about that these people appear in our textbooks? I ask this question because, in the Sciences, this doesn't really happen. We don't assign [Darwin's Origin](#), really, any more, in biology classes, right? We don't really assign [Freud](#) in Psychology classes.

MAA: The question would be: Why not?

JJ: Indeed. But if the question is, what is it that we get out of it, I think it is precisely as you say: why, and why not? Pros and cons of putting in, or omitting the venerable texts of our intellectual traditions in the syllabi. I don't think we should take it for granted that all the things of the past should be jettisoned in a sort of . . . Like, [Dan Dennet](#) likes to say that he's never read any philosophy within 60

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years prior, or something like that. But that's ridiculous, right? But just because those two positions are ridiculous it doesn't mean that we don't need reasons for there to be no position.

GH: One of the answers to your question, I think, is Liam's phrase, “the canonical Tylor”. There are a number of canonical figures who are set as readings. So there has been . . . I don't know if people are still producing readers, maybe they are – I've produced a couple – in which we select short extracts from canonical texts – very rarely saying, I think, that the issues that they engaged with, or the methods that they practised are still current, or should generate more work. However, some of them *do* do that, very clearly, and I think we've demonstrated that very well. Tylor and others do, clearly, have the potential to generate new questions, or to bring us back to the nub of the question we are asking now. So, in my case: what does animism mean? In James' case, what does monotheism mean? How do they define it? How do they – putatively – among whom you research, what do they think those terms mean?

[James L. Cox](#) (JC): Well I think, part of the approach has been, for example, in Eric Sharpe's classic [Comparative Religion: A History](#), is to provide a kind of basis and understanding of what's gone before. So that the students don't think that we're just inventing things as they come along, and: “Aha! Here's a new idea!” Because many of the new ideas are old ideas (10:00). And they've been reworked, and thought through, and so on. And so I think that students need a background, but of course they can make the mistake of – which we sometimes make – just simply critiquing them in the light of a hundred-and-some years later, and applying theories and methods, and ignoring everything that's come in between. But I do think it's important to study the classical and important figures in the history. Another thing that I've done has been to use these figures, because my area of development has been the phenomenology of religion. And many of the key phenomenologists of religion, writing in the early to mid-20th century, bounced themselves off (early ethnographers), particularly criticising them for their assumptions about evolutionary ideas about development, advancement according to almost an application of Darwinian theory in social contexts. And part of the theory there was to say: “Well, unless we're aware of these presuppositions that influence the way we think, we won't be able to critique our own ways of thinking.” And so, just one other thing, and that is – I have most recently been doing work on Australia – the practical effect of these writers. For example, the theories of [Baldwin Spencer](#) and his colleague [Frank Gillen](#), about the aboriginal peoples of Australia being the lowest form of human development. And there's a very famous quote that I use: “Just like the platypus has gone and faded away, so will these people inevitably be taken over by the more advanced

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civilisations.” And if one thinks about the social consequences of this idea, it could be argued, and has been argued that this way of thinking led to justification for genocide. Because aboriginal peoples are going to be made extinct anyway, naturally: “so we can take over”. And it could be said that these theories are not just in the air – just up in the air – but they actually have social consequences. So these are the three things I would say: they need a foundation; we need to be able to critique them according to other theories; and we need to know the social consequences of our thinking.

PT: That's interesting. I mean, the way I encountered Tylor as an undergraduate was in a class about definitions. So you had the substantive Tylorian definition, the functional Durkheimian definition, and the pinnacle, at that point, was [Clifford Geertz](#). And maybe we read [Talal Asad](#) alongside that, if we had a particularly brave tutor!

All: (Laughter)

JC: Which you probably, usually didn't! (Laughter)

PT: So, that's the kind of way in which Tylor would appear in undergraduate curricula. I was thinking of readers. The last anthropology of religion reader I recall is [Lambek's](#): Michael Lambek. And I think Tylor's in there. And I think, again, it's around this definition of religion as belief in spiritual beings – as we all know. And that's part of the history, the conversation - Eric Sharpe's is a good example; [Brian Morris' anthropology](#)

JC: [Fiona Bowie](#)

PT: Exactly. And Tylor's in all of them one way or another.

LS: But that's exactly how I encountered it first. It was in a class talking about the definition of religion and I . . . because sometimes you're just given a slight quote. And obviously, students can't be interested in every quote that they're fed. The thing is that sometimes you're only given a little piece and then you're not given the materials to read them on your own. You might not be given a chapter to read or anything like that. In my case, though, it really sparked my curiosity, because I wanted to know a bit more about what this actually meant. And when we went on to explore theories, for example, in greater detail, I found that [James Fraser](#) One of the texts we were using was [Daniel Pals' *Eight Theories of Religion*](#), and I think it's a very, very good introduction, actually. But he puts Tylor and Fraser together, because they do have similar theories in many respects, but they're actually

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quite different. So they just get a chapter in and of themselves. And he rushes through the material, because he has to, at quite a pace (15:00). So the issues and the nuances can really get lost.

JC: They can, but undergraduates need to have this. And they can be introduced to the primary sources, but if they don't have the foundation You're not going to assign a first year undergraduate student to read two volumes of *Primitive Culture*!

PT: No!

JC: So you have to give them a kind-of basis. And that can generate their interest and go further. And they might go on to post-graduate work.

MAA: There are seminars where I have colleagues that assign Pals. But it's because, at the introductory level, they may be coming in from other disciplines.

JC: That's right.

MAA: So Graham, as you mentioned, you have a reader. And this is where I was actually introduced to your work, and others. So, like a stepping stone to many of these larger works, I think they certainly have their place. Within being a third year into a graduate school, I think it's certainly time to start reading some of the major heavyweights that we're talking about, certainly including Tylor.

GH: That's interesting that we, in the book, most of us engage with primitive cultures and we go right back on that. But you went somewhere very different, somewhere that I'm not even sure that I knew that you'd written anything on it before!

All: (Laughter)

JJ: Well, indeed!

GH: And you'd been to London to hang out with spiritualists and so on, but the whole idea of going to Cuba and Mexico So is that book used by anthropologists?

JJ: No. Most of my colleagues, when I told them about this chapter that I was writing, they were like: "He did what?!"

All: (Laughter)

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JJ: “Are you talking about *that* Tylor??” “Yes, yes!”

GH: The father of armchair anthropology!

JC: I know; it's all you hear!

JC: But it was not one – that (Pals) book – that was a reader. But we used it in a first year course many years ago. But it had little introductions, and in the introduction it mentioned that Tylor went to Mexico, and that he wasn't just an armchair anthropologist. It was trying to give the students an idea that: he's noted for that, he's criticised for that, but he actually did do some field studies.

All: Absolutely, yes.

JJ: The Pals thing is interesting I think. Because one way of reading the Pals book, as opposed to [*An Introduction to – now Nine, I believe – Theorists of Religion- of course the title is now Theories of Religion*](#), right? So what Pals does with these figures is uses them as paradigmatic examples of ideas. And that seems like a perfectly reasonable way to think about what to do with these classical texts: as just very good examples of – maybe a terrible thing – but, nonetheless, very good examples of the thing.

LS: I think you're both absolutely correct. But because you're introducing these ideas to students you can only package them in so many ways. And obviously, you cannot cover everything to the same degree. And actually, I think what was interesting is, that there's actually Because Tylor seems to be one of these figures that people develop a periodic interest in that sometimes is not quite as sustained as figures such as Durkheim. And there's not even, necessarily, always the scholarship to cover every kind of theorist that has had an input in the process. No, I certainly agree that you cannot . . . that you have to package these ideas in one way or another, and you're always going to leave something out. So I don't mean that as a critique of Pals, per se.

GH: There seems to be something different between the ways that Durkheim and others in Sociology, as kind-of the founding figures, are much more positively quoted. Whereas Tylor, my impression is, is usually set up as: “Ok, that was fine in the 19th-century, but we don't do that anymore!”

LS: (Laughs)

PT: Yes. Absolutely.

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GH: “He was stuck in his armchair” – and even if we know (differently), he didn't do enough of it to allow us to be enthusiastic.

PT: I want to mention [Anne Kalvig](#)'s chapter at this point, because Anne's chapter is all about the séances and Tylor's interest in spiritualism

GH: Don't tap the table!

PT: Indeed! Well if the chairs dance, what are we going to do?

All: (Laughter)

PT: And I think – like Miguel's chapter – that it really contributes to All I remember, as an undergraduate student, was that Tylor didn't do any fieldwork. Turns out he actually did quite a lot!

LS: Quite a lot, yes!

PT: And the posthumously published fieldwork notes about the séance that were published by [Stocking](#) – that Anne Kalvig works with – I thought they were really interesting. And there's a very ambivalent Tylor there – about what's taking place – that reveal quite a lot about his own relationships with mortality, (20:00) with his class, with his background as a Quaker, with what he wants to, I think, perhaps, believe about science and superstition – but at the same time being emotionally and intellectually challenged by being at these events.

GH: I think that's like in Mexico. Things happened in the séances and things happen when he's wandering about, he gets a taste for certain kinds of food and these experiences that he has. And he obviously wants to be more celebratory. And then, perhaps, retreats into this more distant version, for whatever reason, I mean.. So that's the kind-of interesting “multiple Tylors” that we discover. And maybe there wasn't one, even for him – that he's a kind-of conflicted figure, being attracted to things that he then wants to dismiss as superstition, you know: “They must have been manipulating the table for this to happen!” So yes, a very interesting character.

MAA: So coming back to what gets assigned and why, these are very he's obviously a genius, but like most people of that intellect, he's very complicated. In Mexico, it would be great to have a photo of him in a sarape as he says he used to wear. I can just see him (Laughter- audio unclear) to the Mexican gods.

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GH: There's a quest there, in the archive, is to find such a picture!

MAA: So one of the things that happens, I think, in studies – and I think it's a symptom just of academia – is having a knee-jerk reaction to who these people were : “This is what I learned in a seminar: Tylor was this – or this other academic – however great they were in their time. *But I want nothing to do with them!*” Without actually ever reading their work.

JJ: Well Freud would have a field day with that!

All: (Laughter)

JJ: I don't know about the other classical thinkers but certainly one good reason to read the Victorian theorists is that nobody writes like that anymore!

LS: That's true!

JJ: I don't want to give the audience the impression that the two-volume, dusty *Primitive Cultures* – four inches of book – is a hard read, because it's not. But it's a cracking read! And this is true of so many Victorian theorists. I don't know what happened, really. I don't know why we started writing terribly, but it isn't true of Tylor.

GH: There's a wealth of examples that he brings together, and whether he does that in the strange cabinet of curiosities thing sometimes, not quite like [*The Golden Bough*](#), but something of that flavour, with all these weird and wonderful things. And you think, some of it, he's got this information, data that has been sent to him and he's presenting it back to people to say, “Look. Humans do amazing things! What are we going to do with that?” So yes, very rich.

JJ: I'm going to be so bold – as the person who is not an anthropologist – to suggest that it is entirely Durkheim's fault!

All: (Laughter)

JJ: So in scholarship we generally learn about thinkers from the debates that they get into, right? So we read Tylor and Durkheim at the same time. If we work on early Christianity, a lot of what we know about early Christian heresies are from orthodox people who write about them, and not from them themselves. And a similar thing has happened, I think, and has always happened in academic work.

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So, because we learn about and teach about figures via these debates, I think what you get, necessarily, are these polarised caricatures, which by necessity lack richness, depth and nuance. So I don't know if there's something in particular about our history, per se. I think it has something to do with our pedagogical tools, and our tools of the transmission of ideas. So, for whatever reason, this is how we transmit ideas: by pitting people against each other.

MAA: So within anthropology . . . So, when I was an undergrad I never heard of any of these folks, or just very slightly. Going into graduate school at phase one at the MA level, one of the people who turned into one of my professors – not on my advisory or my supervisory committee – but when I told him I was interested in religion, the first thing that came out of his mouth was (25:00): “You must really love Durkheim!” And I was like, “Durkheim? Who's Durkheim?”

All: (Laughter)

MAA: But then, it's curious as to *why* Durkheim? He becomes like the champion of actually studying religion, where apparently Tylor is dealing with other things.

LS: That's kind of understandable in the 20th century, I think. Because if you have a book that's called *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and you have book called *Primitive Culture*, there's, like, a political zeitgeist which means you might want to recommend one book and not the other, for purely optics reasons.

GH: There's also the thing about the armchair in the early 20th century and mid-20th century – that the whole Oxford style is just put aside, demonised in that sense. So then, I don't know, maybe it becomes impossible to find that other Tylor again out of old Stockings' notes, there's a few bits of a diary, or whatever it was. Somebody else has to represent it.

JJ: But Durkheim didn't go to Australia!

All: Exactly! (Laughter)

LS: He focussed on one case study and drew all his conclusions about all of human religion from it!

PT: Brilliantly!

LS: Brilliantly – yes! I think we should not get into Durkheim bashing!

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All: (Laughter)**GH:** But does Sociology Do you have to do that? Can't Sociology stay in the study?

JC: What I was trying to do in my paper was to underscore that Tylor, like many others, had certain criteria for determining the validity of a statement, you might say. So, in the issue of the question of whether humans were originally monotheistic, or whether they were at lower levels and developed higher a social evolutionary scale, what I tried to argue was that Tylor had already decided the answer to this, not on the basis of his empirical investigations – although he cited empirical investigations, as so did Lang, both did, and so did [Wilhelm Schmidt](#). Wilhelm Schmidt was fantastic in his ethnographies – but he started from a position and he proved his position. So one way that I tried to look at these influential scholars is to try to help students see these fundamental starting points. And show how, therefore, the starting point produces the conclusion. And then examine how it would be possible to insert actual empirical evidence into this, in order to determine the value of their arguments. That's one thing. But then, the other point I tried to make in the paper was that all of these things, all of these discussions – at least in the study of indigenous peoples – is about people who are just there as sort of laboratory agents and not really agents themselves. But they're there to be studied to prove the theory with which I began. And what I've tried to do is to say, if we look at the some of the ways in which indigenous people have been depicted: as passive; as powerless; as incapable of thinking, or dreaming, or whatever; and they just do things because they're caught in this horrible existence, and they have to solve their problems. But actually, to let them have the voice, or a voice, a prominent voice in how these questions are addressed and answered. And to my mind, if you go back to Tylor or any of these classical theorists, one can begin looking at ways which will impact on the ways we do our own studies. And that, to me, is an important way of using these scholars.

LS: A point that another contributor to the book, [Martin Stringer](#), likes to point out is that it's very easy to classify Tylor in certain respects because he was writing at was the very early stage in the generation of the social sciences. That he, in some ways, lacked the kind of language to actually discuss some of the things he wanted to get at (**30:00**). So one of the things that can get quite Actually reading the text, and then comparing that with the way Tylor was often interpreted, he was interpreted as someone who's just talking about individuals, who are just kind of reflecting The term “savage philosopher” makes you think of an individual. If I actually recall the text accurately, I think he actually only uses this expression once or twice. I don't think he uses it very often.

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GH: That's right.

LS: It's quite an over-played term, because it's *the* term to explain Tylor. But he actually only refers to it once or twice. I think something that really gets missed Martin likes to talk about the fact that Tylor was fascinated with language and with different groups – always remember that these were ethnological examples. So sometimes these things were far more social than they sometimes appeared. And to relate that to the kind of work that is going on in the cognitive sciences of religion now, we seem to be talking about “cognitive capacities”. This is where the psychic unity of mankind comes in. What are patterns of thought that are widely shared? But behind this is very much a social context. So there's a brilliant quote where he talks about the fact that when people encounter dreams and visions, these are always in a very, very specific local form. If you're a Catholic you're encountering dreams of the Virgin Mary, and this is produced by your social context. So, for example, a 1st century Catholic – inasmuch as you can talk about Catholicism at the that time – is not encountering the kind of 16th century vision of the Madonna with all of the tiaras and the stylised - the stylised depiction of the Madonna has already become an important part – and that's inherently social, what he's talking about. If I may just expand on one point: in terms of his, he actually, at one point tried to explain the evolution of the concept of ideas. That's a word that we take for granted: idea. But actually, we trace that to . . . I think it was [Democritus](#), I think – one of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers. And he actually tried to explain this as a product of a sort of animistic culture, where what would be termed ideas were actually encountered as almost personalities. And he tried to locate this in the context of Greece itself.

JC: One thing that appears, at least, when we talk about Tylor's projection theory, that of the inner individual – you have dreams, you see somebody die, breath goes out of them – it seems to imply that there is a spirit or a soul or that there's a body and soul and so on. That seems to me, at least, that what appears lacking in this part of it, is the social context, the ritual context, in which these dreams or visions, or relationships with the dead or ancestors, is all, in a sense, *socially* validated, *socially* constructed. And then becomes lived out in ritual contexts. For example, the work that I've been doing on Australian Aboriginal religions and, in the 1930s what this man I've been looking at, TGH Draylaw, has discovered was that the ancestors who then went back into the ground after creating – and then come forth again in the rituals – are actually reincarnated in their ancestors. But these reincarnations in the ritual now *become* the original ancestor. But none of this, it seems to me, would make sense to It's very difficult to make sense of anyway. But to make sense of it in strictly

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individualistic ways of thinking, it has to be understood in the whole way that this society's constructed, and the relationships that people have amongst one another, and with other groups within that society. So it's not directly related to your question, but it is sort of looking at this idea. If you say that Tylor was using a projection theory – that is, projecting out of the individual experience, to create this – it seems to me that, insofar as he did that, he overlooked and was deficient in the concept of the social construction of which these experiences occur. I'm not saying that these experiences don't occur, but I'm saying that they can only be interpreted and, in a sense, made useful and meaningful in the social context.

PT: And I think that's what Tylor shows us about the history of anthropology. **(35:00)** In the beginning Tylor and others are collecting instances of beliefs or practices of X kind, of Y kind and then plotting where they are in populations. And as people start to look at the kind of methodologies, the evolutionist methodologies, then you get that moment where ethnography starts to become, you know . . . Perhaps following [Boas](#) in the United States – the idea that rather than collecting and arranging ethnographic data in that way, one should contextualise it, rather than see it as individual units that have that kind of distribution. But understand them as holistically interdependent with one another. In other words, ethnography fieldwork: going to a particular place, staying there for a sustained period of time during which one learns the language and understands how this data is all connected relationally. That's partly what studying a figure does, isn't it? It allows you to have access to the history of a discipline in a slightly different light, and seeing it unfold.

GH: We've actually come to end of the time allotted for this conversation. And that maybe actually a perfect point, that we've reached, to stop: this thought about why these classic figures remain important and what we pick up from them. So thank you all for joining me in the conversation.

All: Thank you. A pleasure.

LS: Thanks to our audience, as well, for participating!

All: (Laughter)

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