THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN: "GLOBAL POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT FOR POSITIVE CHANGE ALWAYS HAS TO START LOCALLY"

DAŠA LIČEN: INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

Thomas Hylland Eriksen is a professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo and president of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA). His fields of research include identity, nationalism, and globalization. Since 2011 he has been comparatively and interdisciplinary focusing on globalization under the heading "Overheating," which he presented in Ljubljana on November 27th 2015 as one of the speakers at this year's symposium *Why the World Needs Anthropologists*. In addition to this interview, which is oriented towards a rather scholarly audience, there is one intended for a more general public that was published in the journal *Razpotja* in December 2015, in which Eriksen speaks about his wider social engagement.

Why the World Needs Anthropologists is a rare event that tries to bring anthropology out of the ivory tower, although popularization is normally something that our discipline almost fights against.

I think anthropologists should be more conscious of how they're perceived in the broader public sphere because in most places where there's anthropology a certain withdrawal has been going on for decades. There are many pressing issues of the day, dealing with everything from climate change to identity politics and to human nature, where anthropologists aren't present the way they should have been—but this wasn't always the case. If we go a few generations back, there were quite a few anthropologists that were engaged public intellectuals, were visible, were well known, wrote popular books, took part in discussions, and so on. We see very little of this now. If we go back to the 1960s, you've got people like Margaret Mead; her research is quite controversial among anthropologists, but she certainly succeeded in placing anthropology on the map by being engaged and by being present where there were important debates. Perhaps we should be better at prioritizing good

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writing—not just technical skills in sophisticated analytical writing, but good, engaging writing that people want to read.

This kind of interrogation and this kind of engagement isn't merely about understanding us better, but it can have moral implications as well because it helps us to see each other in a different light; so, yes, there's an obligation. I'm not saying that everybody should do this. Some people do research best and that's what they do, and other people can be good talkers and can popularize other people's research, and that's great. In a greater ecology of anthropology we need different kinds of professionals, some who are extremely specialized, who know everything about kinship, gender, and power in a small traditional society, whereas others can be good at using this knowledge along with other bits of knowledge to tell a compelling story that people want to hear, and I think we should do more about it.

But you're actually all of these in one.

No—I mean, well, yeah, I'm doing my best, but I feel that we shouldn't disparage popularization. There's been a tendency to look a bit down upon it, but we need all kinds of people. For me it was wonderful to have someone at my department who was occasionally out in the real world and wrote in newspapers, so that others, people that would never go to university, would actually hear a little bit of what social anthropology was about.

Could you briefly describe what your most recent project, Overheating, is about?

What we're trying to do with Overheating is to fill a gap in the literature on globalization, and not merely about life modes in one place, but we're trying to say something general, what I called the "clash of scales," between the large and local. The large scale—you know, the uniform, the contagion, the state, the world of global capitalism on one hand, and on the other hand there are local lives that people live in their own community, so we're trying to bridge that gap. We're a group of researchers who've done fieldwork in lots of locations around the world and we try to produce ethnographic material that's comparable. So we're really going to do it globally and we're still a bit off; we've got a couple of years left, working very hard, creating an analysis of the global situation seen from below.

It's almost the anthropology of everything, right?

Not quite; it's the anthropology of the global crisis the way that it's being perceived locally. Say you live somewhere in Australia and all of a sudden there's a mining company that comes in next door. And somehow it removes all the topsoil, and it removes rocks and stones, and grass and trees, and you ask yourself, who can I blame and what can I do? It's a kind of question that many people ask when they're being confronted with global or large-scale changes that affect their local community or local lives. Our informants don't distinguish between the environment, the economy, and identity, but they all somehow interact and affect local life. It's the anthropology of local responses to global changes. You can say some of these are local responses to global neoliberalism. For example, I had

master's student who's done half a year of fieldwork in Dominica, a small Caribbean island, and she's been looking at the small local farmers. For many years they were doing rather well, but they had protected access to the European and British markets and then fifteen or twenty years ago they lost these privileges, so they had to compete almost on the same level as large-scale plantations in Costa Rica and other parts of the world. They found that extremely difficult. So she's looking at the clash of scales between the local and the global. We're trying the same together because the reaction among the banana farms in Dominica is somehow comparable to workers in the shipbuilding business in Korea, who find that they're losing the jobs or losing their rights because of competition from Chinese shipbuilders, or people in Australia, who feel that they're losing their local environment because of the bigger coal mining company that comes in. So, in other words, there's a pattern to this; it's the anthropology of local reactions to these kinds of global large-scale processes.

And ethnography is taken really seriously to reveal these processes, right?
Yes, I think it's important and that's one of the shortcomings in the mainstream literature on globalization: there are anecdotes from people's lives, but the uniqueness of each locality isn't taken seriously enough. The problem of anthropological studies of globalization has often been the opposite; namely, that you go really deeply into one place and you somehow neglect the rest. So we're trying to feel the gap in both ways here, to find the middle ground or a third way between. You have Anthony Giddens' and Manuel Castells' literature on globalization and, on the other hand, you have the person that works locally with a magnifying glass, studying the relationship between the grains of sand on the beach. We're trying to connect these levels.

The seriousness of global warming has been quite neglected among not only anthropologists, but all of social sciences. When did you get this breakthrough? When did you become a scientist that's aware of this and take it seriously?
Well, it's hard to tell. I mean it's coming now, I see that the anthropology of climate change is one of the big growth industries. Just like ethnicity and nationalism were big in the 1970s and 1980s, when I came into anthropology, lots of things were happening. You're from Slovenia, you know the breakup of Yugoslavia, which was a shock to us, and we really needed to understand what was happening, and the genocide in Rwanda around the same time, and around the same time Hindu nationalists came to power in India, which wasn't supposed to happen, you know it contradicted everything we thought we knew about India. And around the same time there were controversies around migration, multiculturalism, diversity, and Islam in Western Europe, and so you had a really overheated time around nationalism and ethnicity and the politics of identity at that time. What's happened after the turn of the century is that climate change, the subject that some people speak of as the Anthropocene—you know, the new geological era—has in the space of just a few years become one of the big fashionable terms in anthropology and the social sciences, but it came late.

As for me, I don't know when I got the idea that I wanted to do something about this. It must have been many years ago, but has been simmering and I've been doing other things, and finally I got the opportunity a few years ago to look at this more closely. To look at what's interesting for us, what can we do, we're not geophysicists, we can't really predict the temperature of the world, we don't know that much about CO2. What we can do is study how people respond, how they react, how they talk about it, and what they do, and again the question is who I can blame and what I can do.

The concern with climate change can be quite serious in the sense that it creates a sense of a feeling of powerlessness, there's nothing I can do, we just have to let things happen. And for this reason I've been interested in my own fieldwork in Australia, where I've been working in an industrial town in central Queensland. I've been interested in how environmental engagement begins with things that you can manage. I probably can't do anything about the world's climate, but maybe I can save these trees, maybe I can save the dolphins in the harbor. How that engagement begins, and what's probably one of my main findings, is that global political engagement for positive change always has to start locally.

Although anthropology doesn't give recipes on how to stop climate changes, we're not completely helpless.

I'm trying to do this in things that I'm writing right now, actually. Just before you rang me up, I was writing something about this. We can show that for economies scaling down can be a good thing because that will give people a sense of ownership or a sense of control. When it comes to the world of communication, we have to scale up instead in order to connect our own local concerns with those of people elsewhere. For example, one of the environmental activists I got to know rather well in Australia started out as a housewife. She started by being worried about the dolphins and turtles in her own backyard, in the harbor where she lived. She saw them floating dead on the surface and was wondering if this had something to do with industry. It was a very local concern, but then she started expanding her scope, so she moved up to a higher level of scale and, before I left Australia, she was already reading up on the oil sands in Alberta in Canada, on global climate change affecting the great reef, so she expanded her engagement, but it started as a kernel, a very local, very small engagement. So that would be my main story: that engagement has to start locally, that people have to reclaim ownership in their own communities.

There's a clash of scales there. It's local environmental engagement that I'm talking about—where people living in industrial towns are trying their best to do something about the quality of the air, about emissions, about noise, about the water, and so on, and they find it hard to relate to global large-scale environmental organizations, such as Greenpeace. Greenpeace, the world champions on saving the world, are pretty good at saving the Great Barrier Reef, but they don't really care about us, who live here in this town, because they never come here, they never engage with us. So they operate on a very large scale.

I remember when I was a young man we had a prime minister in Norway. She was the one that introduced the term *sustainable development*. There was a UN commission called "our coming future" and she was a chair of that commission, so she was world-famous for her environmental engagement—but at home, in Norway, she did nothing. She wanted to pump the oil out of the North Sea as fast as possible in order to ensure prosperity, growth, and low unemployment. So that's a clash of scales. That was a long answer, but there's one answer that we can give: be wary of people that speak in a general way, when what they say can have consequences for people that live in much more specific locations at local levels of scale.

As an anthropologist, you're obviously not allowed to judge people; however, sometimes it's really hard to avoid judgement, especially with the overheating issue.

Yes, it's the balancing and we're talking about it a lot within the Overheating group. All of the people in our group are engaged in one way or another, engaged in the sense that you want to use your knowledge to make the world a slightly better place. Traditionally, anthropologists haven't been too good at that; this isn't to pass judgment, just to lay out the facts and say, well, this is what the world looks like and this is why this makes sense to those people and not to those people. I believe that this paradigm, this kind of relative paradigm, has collapsed. It no longer functions precisely for the reasons I was suggesting; we're now all part of the same conversation. We're all in the same boat. So there's no good reason anymore to make a sharp distinction between us and them because we're somehow all a part of the same thing, we're facing the same challenges. Australia may not be a typical place because people in Australia are educated, read and watch TV, and so on, but so do they in many other places. For example, where my doctoral student is working in rural Sierra Leone, there have been lots of changes going on. It's an overheated place in the sense of the Chinese investors or other foreign investors coming in, opening up mines, and new roads being built, so for some people this means opportunities, and for others it means misery. My student asks a guy "so, how do you explain these changes taking place in your community in the last few years?" and this guy would just shrug and say "well, you know, man, it's global." We have to try to find out what exactly he means when he says "it's global."

We're all part of the same moral space and sometimes we have to take a stance; we have to have a moral or political stance, anything else would be irresponsible. But we have to strike a balance between that kind of engagement and our credibility as researchers, and so we have to be balanced. When I study people that are against climate change I also have to talk to people that are on the other side, people that really believe in the paradigm or progress of industrialism and so on, and take their world seriously. To me, this is the main sort of double bind in contemporary civilization, between economic growth and ecological sustainability, and there's no easy way out. There's no reason that anybody should have the answer. When people ask me in Australia, "you're a professor from Europe, so what do you

think what should we do? What do you want us to do? What's your advice?" I have to say "Sorry, I'm trying to solve this together with you. I don't have the answer."

Something I was wondering about, which you probably already stumbled upon, is religious people. Judeo-Christian tradition has the view of the Earth ending with an apocalypse. How does this fit into the Overheating project? Do you feel like some people are happy about what's going on?
It's a very good question. I think these people exist, but no, I haven't met any of them. It could be a follow-up project of Overheating. Someone should do that and you're probably right: there's something about the way many people talk about climate change that resembles these Judeo-Christian ideas about the end time. We're approaching the end; we're approaching the final phase. Think about the popularity of post-apocalyptic films in science fiction. It started with the Mad Max films in the early 1980s and there's been a sort of series of Hollywood and other films about the world after the apocalypse, whether it's climate collapse, whether it's some other kind of global collapse, so there's a real thirst for these narratives. I don't believe in that. In the text I'm writing now I just quoted T. S. Elliott, who writes famously that the world ends not with a bang but with a whimper. There's no before and after. Many of the communist revolutionaries have similar ideas to Christians about the apocalypse: things are going to get worse and worse and worse, and then after the revolution everything is going to be fine. But I think we've got two hundred years of experience with revolutions; we know that they tend to reproduce many of the problems they were meant to solve or otherwise they create new ones. Take the Arab spring in North Africa and the Middle East. I think it's very dangerous to behave as though history has a direction and that history is going somewhere.

You mentioned the term *Anthropocene*. Many find it quite problematic because it puts humans in the center, not only as the source of all the trouble we're facing, but also as more important than anything else on the planet. How do you feel about that?
That's right, but some scientists want to have it both ways. Because some of them use the Anthropocene or they think in terms of the Anthropocene and at the same time they emphasize that humans and non-humans are really in a symbiotic relationship. I don't have a lot of time for those kinds of arguments because, if you take the state of the world with climate change, with huge extractive industries, I mean that's one thing that we discovered almost after we started Overheating, the mining boom, the global mining boom is enormous and largely a result of the growing Chinese and Indian economies, but that's not all of it. Take fracking in the US. Only five or six years ago, most researchers thought that we would run out of fossil fuels pretty soon, so we had to think of something new really quickly. With the nuclear or solar or wind alternative, and now with the new fracking technologies, we seem to have an almost indefinite supply of fossil fuels. That's not going to be a problem. I feel it's irresponsible to question the responsibility of humanity. We put ourselves into this

situation, and we're driving other species to extinction. It's our fault and we need to take responsibility for that. However much I may love my cat and however much I acknowledge that humans and other species, especially domestic animals, have somehow coevolved, there's been a mutual relation that's been very close, and you can be fond of your cow, and you can realize how your dog and you have somehow developed in parallel over the last few thousand years—however much we relish our relationships with other species, we must realize that human beings are special; there's no chimpanzee, even the smartest ape you can come across, or the smartest dolphin, that can say, for example, "well you know my dad was poor but at least he was honest." Only human beings can make that sentence so there's something special about this, and we should own up to that responsibility.

I recently read McKibben's *Eaarth*, where he suggests that in the future the world will become much more local then it is now. How do you see that?

I'm not sure if it's a good thing or a bad thing. As I said, if we're concerned with climate and the environment scaling down, economies would make a huge difference because the things you need will increasingly be produced locally on a small scale. The way I see it is that in the human economy commodities would be expensive, so you would look after your things. I'd have one cup and look after it because I wouldn't have twenty other similar cups in my cupboard, as I do. So things would be expensive and services would be cheaper, so it would make sense, for example, if your jacket is torn, to take it to the tailor and have it mended, but it doesn't now, it's much cheaper to throw it away and buy new one. So in a scaled-down economy and a post–fossil fuel world there would be less abandoned energy. You'd travel less, we'd be back to the time when shipping a cargo of coffee from Brazil was really expensive, so you probably couldn't have coffee everyday, but maybe you could have it twice a week and you'd enjoy it more. But having said this, yes, at the level of the economy, I believe that scaling down is one possible solution. I mean not religiously, not fanatically. Scaling down as a sensible thing to do, producing things locally, but at the same time a global level of communication. The ability to communicate globally has been a wonderful thing for humanity because it enabled us to expand our scope and to live communicatively on a much larger scale than before. It's easy to identify things happening elsewhere and it's easy to think in terms of humanity, it's almost as if the dreams of the philosophers Kant and Hegel are coming true, you know. Kant wrote about cosmopolitanism life towards the end of his life, eternal peace, and how people can communicate across borders because he saw that coming. Hegel wrote in a very different way, as a romantic philosopher about the *Weltgeist* 'the world spirit', and now we see incipient traces of this cosmopolitan dialog that Kant was talking about, and maybe to some extent even of the *Weltgeist*, which has been part of the premise of Overheating, that people around the world relate to many of the same processes. For example, while we were doing fieldwork, Nelson Mandela died and I asked everyone in the project to take notes about how people responded to Nelson Mandela's death; maybe we can use that for something. Everywhere, from Sierra Leone to

Peru, to Canada, there was a local or domestic discourse about Nelson Mandela, which said something about the fact that we now live in a shared world, up to a certain point.

Would you comment on the situation with refugees pouring into Europe?
There's a lot to say about this, and a lot has already been said. If I were to add anything, I'd mention two things: First, this isn't likely to end soon, even if by some miracle the situation in Syria improves dramatically. The Mediterranean is one of the starkest boundaries in the world regarding welfare, prosperity, and political stability, and people desperate to escape war, oppression, drought, or poverty will continue to make their way across. So in Europe we need to rethink policy on refugees and migration taking this into account. Second, the very different responses in different European countries are a reminder that this also isn't a unitary continent; we have different histories, identities, discourses, and circumstances leading to the variations.

What about the refugee crisis in Scandinavia?
It varies here as well. Sweden has pursued an open and generous policy, but has recently witnessed a series of attacks on refugee centers. Denmark has been less welcoming, and the Danish government actually placed advertisements in Arabic-language newspapers discouraging refugees from coming. Norway is perhaps intermediate, but the coalition government, which includes the anti-immigration Progress Party, is divided and lacking in strong commitment either way. Nevertheless, refugees are trickling into Norway every day now, not least of all in the barren wastelands on the Norwegian-Russian borderland. The Mediterranean drama is without question the main event unfolding in our region now; it polarizes populations, creates confusion and indecision among politicians, and requires a great deal of political imagination, and I should add humanistic values, to be addressed in a proper way. What anthropologists can contribute are, perhaps, mainly stories and analyses seeing the issues from the refugees' perspective. We have seen Germany and Hungary as opposing poles.

How does multiculturalism in Norway work otherwise?
On the whole well, in the sense that most immigrants have jobs, integrate into Norwegian society, and become Norwegian at least by the second generation; but there are issues that polarize the population here as elsewhere, for the time being especially concerning Islam. There are doubtless some tricky issues concerning the place of religion in public life, the position of women, and freedom of expression, but anti-Muslim attitudes, which are relatively widespread, are not helpful in promoting the integration of minorities. So yes, we have challenges ahead; the minority population has grown fast in the last couple of decades, and this has changed the demography of the Oslo area in particular. The solution, to make the answer brief, is education, jobs, and a national identity that's capable of encompassing cultural diversity.

Is it too much to say you're also a kind of whistleblower, at least for anthropology?
That's too much to say, yes. I don't see myself as a whistleblower, but I'm doing my best in the EASA (European Association of Social Anthropologists) and elsewhere. I think we should all make an effort and—to return to what we started to talk about, making anthropology a bit more visible, and trying to be a bit more generous to what's the outside world—trying to explain in a more engaging way what we're doing, and why our knowledge isn't just fascinating, but it can also be important. It's crucial in many ways, both on a small scale and on a large scale, the large scale we already spoke about, it's about creating a more nuanced picture of the world and what it is to be a human being. On the small scale it has to do with the struggle of anthropology in academia. I don't know about the situation in Slovenia, but we're struggling a bit here now. Norway has a very large anthropological community and we're used to being a popular subject, but in recent years student recruitment hasn't been as good as it used to.

I saw you do lots of things outside of anthropology, but maybe they aren't completely outside of anthropology; can you even detach yourself from the science you're doing?
Anthropology isn't a nine-to-five job. It is not as if, when you leave the office, you're no longer an anthropologist. You make your observations and you continue to think. But I guess we all do things that are unrelated. I've got a family, for example, you can always make observations of your children, but you know it isn't the same thing as being a father. It's also about scale, the small scale. I also play music, we have a CD out. This is progressive rock, Gentle Knife. You can find Gentle Knife music on Spotify if you're interested.

Did you always feel this value or the need to give value to other human beings, or was it something that came about when you started studying anthropology?
It's hard to say; it's a chicken-and-egg problem, isn't it? Why are biologists and anthropologists so different in their approaches to human nature? Is it because they always were like that, or were we brainwashed by different faculties at the university? It's hard to tell. I came to anthropology from philosophy, and what I enjoyed about anthropology was that in a certain way it was philosophy with people. You could ask really fundamental questions about humanity, about knowledge, about emotions, about reality, and so on but you did this through other people's worlds, instead of just speculating on pure ideas, so that's one of the things that attracted me about anthropology: that you have this philosophical background but at the same time you've got real people.

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN: »GLOBALNI POLITIČNI ANGAŽMA ZA POZITIVNE SPREMEMBE SE MORA VEDNO ZAČETI NA LOKALNI RAVNI«

Thomas Hylland Eriksen je doktoriral iz socialne antropologije v Oslu, kjer tudi poučuje kot profesor na tamkajšnji univerzi. Med osrednjimi temami, s katerimi se ukvarja, ni samo ekologija, temveč predvsem identiteta, nacionalizem in globalizacija, ki jih skuša približati posameznikom zunaj antropologije oz. znanosti sploh. Verjame v to, da mora znanstvenik vstati iz naslonjača in vsaj s kančkom takega entuziazma, kot to počne sam, poseči v širšo skupnost. S komentarji tragedije, ki jo je povzročil Breivik, je stopil iz akademskih vrst in se približal laičnemu posamezniku. V zadnjih treh letih se najintenzivneje ukvarja s projektom Overheating *(Pregrevanje), o katerem je 27. novembra 2015 na dogodku* Why the World Needs Anthropologists? *(Zakaj svet potrebuje antropologe?) govoril v Ljubljani. Vpetost v širšo družbo močno spodbuja in pravi, da gre pravzaprav za dolžnost, ki jo antropologija ima, a je posebej v zadnjih desetletjih nanjo pozabila.*

Kdor koli trdi, da je globalno segrevanje domena naravoslovcev in ne antropologov, pa mora vedeti, da so za Eriksena in antropologijo okoljske spremembe, ki smo jim priče, stvar človeka in njegovih dejavnosti, ne narave. Projekt o pregrevanju se tako osredinja na globalno krizo, natančneje na ekonomsko, okoljsko in identitetno ali kulturno krizo, vendar te ravni opazuje na lokalnem nivoju. S tem projektom, ki ga Eriksen vodi, želijo raziskovalci posredovati splošno sporočilo o tem, kaj globalne krize pomenijo za lokalne skupnosti v različnih delih sveta. Z etnografskim delom razgrinjajo odzive lokalnih skupnosti na globalne procese in tako povežejo obe ravni, s čimer se večina znanstvenikov že desetletja spoprijema precej neuspešno.

Ko so bili v sedemdesetih in osemdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja zelo žgoči problemi v zvezi z etničnostjo in nacionalizmom, so se antropologi odzvali in o tem obširno pisali. Zdaj je za svet težava globalno segrevanje. Čeprav so Eriksena podnebne spremembe pritegnile že dolgo prej, kakor smo v antropologiji in množičneje začeli razpravljati o antropocenu, je s projektom Overheating *dobil priložnost, da na tem področju nekaj naredi, čeprav je (le) antropolog in ne more pritisniti na gumb ter zaustaviti ekološke krize. Ugotovil je, da pozna antropologija množico pisanih zgodb majhnih skupnosti s pomembnim sporočilom: spremembe se začnejo lokalno. Jasno je, da bo v prihodnosti moral svet delovati bolj lokalno, zadovoljni bomo morali biti z manj. Namesto vsak dan, si bomo, na primer, kavo lahko privoščili enkrat na teden. Seveda ni vse, kar je globalno, že samo po sebi problematično; na globalni ravni je npr. komunikacija izjemno pozitivna pridobitev. Antropologi raziskovanih skupnosti načeloma ne sodimo, vendar je, ko govorimo o klimatskih spremembah, zaradi vsesplošne akutnosti problema, to težko. Po mnenju Eriksena se v takih okoliščinah sodbam ne moremo izogniti, in v tem pogledu se je nemara tudi antropologija nekoliko spremenila.*

Človek, ki se z identitetami ukvarja že desetletja, bi težko zaobšel trenutno paniko v Evropi, čeprav je bilo o pribežnikih že zelo veliko povedanega. Eriksen pri tem poudarja dve stvari, in sicer, da se tok beguncev, kot kaže, ne bo prav kmalu ustavil in bi zaradi tega Evropa morala

premisliti svoj odnos do beguncev in migracij; na drugi strani pa opozarja na to, da zelo različni odzivi evropskih držav na trenutne razmere kažejo, da Evropa ni tako zelo enotna celina. Pri tem antropologi lahko sodelujemo s predstavljanjem zgodb iz perspektive migrantov. V tem pogledu antropologija ni samo zanimiva, temveč tudi pomembna. Kot drugod po Evropi je tudi na Norveškem begunska drama osrednji dogodek, ki polarizira prebivalstvo. Gre za državo, kjer imajo v splošnem z multikulturalizmom dobre izkušnje, a tudi nekaj izzivov, ki jih velja premisliti. Rešitev vidi v izobraževanju, zaposlovanju in nacionalni identiteti, ki bi zaobjela kulturno raznovrstnost.

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