

Anthropology as counter-culture: an interview with Thomas Hylland Eriksen

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The question of whether or not social anthropology should predominantly be understood as an academic discipline reserved to a small group of specialized professionals or as a public endeavour that explicitly aims at developing its relevance for a wider audience has long been a point of contention. The case for the discipline's practical relevance was famously made by Malinowski (e.g. 1929; 1930; 1945), but met with scepticism by authors such as Richards (1944) and Evans-Pritchard (1946), who drew a clear distinction between scientific and applied research. In the recent past, increased anthropological engagement with politically charged topics such as climate change and global migration, as well as government demands on anthropologists to show the 'impact' of their work, have revived this question once again. In the following interview, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo and President of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), shares some of his thoughts on where and how to situate anthropological scholarship between academia, policy-makers, and the wider public. Eriksen has published widely on topics including ethnicity, globalization, nationalism, and the history of anthropology, carrying out fieldwork in Trinidad, Norway, and, most recently, Queensland, Australia. Beyond his wide-reaching influence within the discipline, he has acquired the status of a public intellectual in his home country Norway.

Felix Stein: You were made Professor of Anthropology in your early thirties, and could have made a career by simply focusing on your academic work. Why didn't you?

Thomas Hylland Eriksen: For me, there has never been a sharp boundary between what I do as an academic and what I do in other contexts, so communicating only with my colleagues was not really an option. This kind of monastic existence would not have suited my personality.

Moreover, as anthropologists we write, talk, and think in different registers, depending on the topic and the audience we wish to address, and there are many synergies involved in communicating with different groups of people. Writing for an exclusively academic audience has its obvious advantages. While you have to follow strictly defined conventions, it allows you to delve more deeply into a topic and take an established discourse for granted. You do not have to explain everything, and you

can take all the familiar shortcuts to quickly get to the point. Moreover, many academic discussions in anthropology, on method or on key analytical concepts, for example, are clearly not very interesting for a broader public. This does not render them any less important, as they advance the field and keep us intellectually disciplined. So this is not a plea for populism.

At the same time, addressing a wider public can be just as intellectually demanding as academic work. Since the people who usually read us are either our colleagues, who are paid to do it, or our students, who are forced to do it, writing for a different readership requires a strong power of persuasion, convincing readers to go out of their way and engage with topics they would otherwise have ignored. I've always spoken in all kinds of fora, from pensioners' clubs to secondary schools, all of which can be very rewarding. In these settings, you get different sets of questions, which can be just as smart as those asked by academics; they just come from a different place.

Finally, there are times when the people you want to address are not academics simply because the questions raised are of societal importance, and are already being discussed in civil society. For example, colleagues and I regularly organize public meetings at the Oslo House of Literature, where we speak about current issues. Our recent series of meetings on the refugee crisis has been widely publicized and advertised in newspapers.

FS: Has your public engagement changed over time?

THE: My dear friend and mentor, the late Prof. Eduardo P. Archetti, once said that I had to choose between Norway and anthropology because it would not be possible to do both well. He clearly had a point, so, yes, I have meandered back and forth a bit, and I find myself increasingly gravitating towards the academic pole. One reason is that I have found it increasingly difficult to create interesting conversations. In the 1990s, the European *Zeitgeist* was such that we could easily interrogate the nature of national identity and ask cheeky, playful questions about cultural identity and diversity. It was a rather optimistic decade regarding globalization, cultural hybridity, multiculturalism – that is, many of the issues that anthropologists would typically be in a position to say something about. In Europe's current climate, which is one of fear and ideological polarization, we encounter far greater wariness and even hostility.

At the risk of sounding self-centred, I should mention that I have also in recent years been turned into a symbol of everything that is wrong with society. The right-wing terrorist Anders Breivik had a minor obsession with me, quoting me several times in his manifesto and YouTube video as a prime example of that spineless, cultural relativist, effeminate intellectual who deconstructed Norwegian culture and opened the floodgates for mass immigration. This shows how tense the public sphere has become in this country, as in other parts of Europe, like Poland or Austria. If you want to do what anthropologists are best at, namely challenging established ideas and worldviews so as to expand our own, you may currently end up in a highly politicized media environment where you are forced to think strategically, which is not a very productive strategy, intellectually speaking. At the moment, our ability to shape public discourse seems somewhat diminished. Yet, I continue because few other people do. For example, I have written a few journalistic pieces now about the refugee crisis (e.g. Eriksen 2015*b*; 2016), simply because there seemed to be a gap out there that needed to be filled.

Moreover, anthropology completely depends on the academics who remain in the so-called 'ivory tower' and carry out research on sacrifice and kinship in Eastern Indonesia,

or who produce fascinating and complex analyses of cosmologies in the Amazon. Without anthropology more narrowly conceived, there would be nothing to be public about. There is a dialectic there, in which anthropologists should not be committed or obliged to do everything at once. Nevertheless, in many countries, including the UK, it would be good for the discipline to have a few more public figures. We need clear-minded, lucid people who can raise new questions, change established views, and re-enchant what Max Weber (2001 [1930]: 61) has called *entzauberte*, a disenchanted world.

Norway's most famous anthropologist, Fredrik Barth, did not popularize much of his work, but he gave a series of TV lectures in the late 1970s where the main lesson to many of us, including myself, was that there are many recipes for living. Not very applied, yet incredibly applicable! So this discipline is, in a sense, at its most relevant when it is also at its most irrelevant; when we do not try to make policy recommendations but instead instil a sense of wonder at the diversity of human life in those people who care to listen. Anthropology has a radical and subversive potential in this respect, which was famously described thirty years ago by Marcus and Fischer in their book *Anthropology as cultural critique* (1999 [1986]).

FS: You have argued in the past that many anthropological concepts have become part of the vocabulary of journalists and politicians (Eriksen 2004: 3), whilst also observing a certain withdrawal of anthropology from the public sphere (Eriksen 2015a). How do the two observations go together?

THE: Some of the basic tenets of anthropology, to do with minority rights and basic cultural relativism, for example, have become part of mainstream discourse. Many minority groups around the world actively use anthropological concepts in promoting their own interests. So the concepts and ideas of our discipline have spread around quite a bit, whereas academic anthropology as such has generally not lived up to the promise of participating fully in a more broad-spectrum intellectual discourse. As I argued in my book *Engaging anthropology* (Eriksen 2006), until some time after World War II a very broad and diverse interface existed between anthropological research and greater society, which is less easy to discern now. For example, the moment that the general public began talking about culture, anthropology virtually ceased using the term because it had become too complex and compromised.

FS: Is anthropology's reflexive turn of the 1980s a cause of the declining importance of our discipline?

THE: Postmodernism was mainly harmful in anthropology, which never really needed it. There were other disciplines, such as political science, that required postmodernism's destabilizing character and its decentring, relativizing, and naughty attitudes. But anthropology was somehow postmodern *avant la lettre* because of our sensitivity to cultural specificities and the methodology of cultural relativism. Moreover, postmodernism hit anthropology at the same time as postcolonial concerns that questioned established modes of speaking on behalf of others; it was a double shock. The result was to some extent what Clifford Geertz called 'epistemological hypochondria' (1988: 71), leading to a loss of confidence. Reluctance to generalize, typical of anthropology, is often well justified. But we do have to find a way of telling compelling stories, which are persuasive, engaging, and truthful. Perhaps one place to start is by learning from good historians and develop our craft as storytellers.

FS: You mentioned a couple of surprising audiences for your own work, such as pensioners' clubs and secondary schools. Do you not focus on policy-makers at all?

THE: No, I do not consider it my job to give policy advice to government, even if at times I may have done so inadvertently. In the Scandinavian countries there is a tacit division of labour between sociology and anthropology, where policy is part of the societal assignment of the sociologists. They publish much in Norwegian, and have their research on the Norwegian welfare state, gender equality, and other issues which have an immediate policy relevance. Anthropologists are far better at asking surprising questions, thereby enabling alternative perspectives. We are good at making voices heard which are otherwise silenced. In doing all this, and in slowing the world down a little bit, we actually function as sand in the machinery of policy-making. There is an implicit anarchism, or naughtiness, in anthropology, and we should cultivate it. Perhaps our role is that of the trickster, somebody who occupies an outsider position and who can be fairly irresponsible at times (cf. Eriksen 2013). In a world dominated by the twin spectres of identity politics and neoliberalism, anthropological knowledge is a counter-culture that remains simultaneously more marginal and more important than ever. This implies that we should also resist the efforts of funding bodies that want to gear our work to policy advice. Instead, we should show them that their efforts may compromise anthropology's capacity to take a step back from day-to-day life and to consider other possibilities.

As a result, the societal impact of anthropology is greatest when it is unintentional. Fredrik Barth once said that the main difference between basic research and applied research is that basic research is so much more applicable. When it is good, you can use it for lots of things, as, for example, accounting for the dissolution of Yugoslavia with reference to Evans-Pritchard's studies of Nuer politics. High-quality basic research can tell you something of lasting value about the human condition.

Another reason that our policy impact is modest is that we specialize in studying the small-scale, and we are therefore instinctively wary of universalizing projects such as development. So while there may be basic similarities between human beings all around the globe, there is no reason to believe that the policies that work in Nepal apply in Nigeria – this is what we've been telling aid workers for fifty years. It may be at this small-scale level that we can give policy advice, which may not be popular but which could still be useful. After all, this is one of the basic insights for which Elinor Ostrom, who had a keen interest in anthropological perspectives, was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics.

FS: So far, it seems as if your public engagement was partially based in personal preference. But is there anything inherent in the discipline of anthropology that pushes anthropologists towards it?

THE: With respect to policy work there are clearly other academic disciplines such as political sciences, economics, and sociology that are far more central than anthropology. They are directly engaged in running countries, from the ministry of finance to national legislation and local governance. But when it comes to public engagement, yes, I do believe that we have a collective responsibility to be visible. Since anthropology enables you to revel in human diversity and stimulates your imagination, it shows you what could be possible. You might say that it resembles science fiction in this respect. It also

enables you to come close to some of the more fundamental philosophical questions about what it is to be a human being, but often in a more comprehensible and interesting way than academic philosophy does. Thinking about these big questions may push at least a few anthropologists towards public engagement. Some time ago it was said by a colleague of ours that anthropology can be philosophy with the people in place, and this is a message that we should be able to sell.

FS: Putting epistemic points aside for a second, is there not something in the anthropological method that makes it sit uneasily with public engagement? I am particularly thinking about the time it takes to carry out ethnographic research.

THE: Yes, this is one of the reasons why anthropology represents a kind of counter-culture. In fact, ethnographic research is not very intensive in terms of capital or even labour, but it certainly is in terms of time. After all, you spend a long time in the field, much of which is spent waiting for people to show up, which of course they never do. I recently carried out fieldwork in Australia for just four months, which already seems excessive to my colleagues in human geography and sociology. However, as every ethnographer knows, you have to hang around for a long time. This can also be a weakness, as the party is often over when we finally get around to publishing.

Maybe, in addition to the patient, long-term mode of ethnography that stretches over eighteen months, we should at least look into the potentials of fast anthropology, in which we use the ethnographic gaze but work in a much faster fashion. Publishing is a related matter, and it is great to see that attempts are now made to accelerate the process, which has been incredibly sluggish until now. We should find new ways of mixing the fast and the slow. One postdoctoral fellow on my project, for example, took part in a fact-finding mission just after finishing her Ph.D., collaborating with other social scientists to write a very useful report on Syria (Christophersen, Liu, Thorleifsson & Tiltnes 2013), at an early stage of the refugee crisis when it was still easy to travel across from Lebanon to the Syrian border. While this was done within a month, her previous training in participant observation still enabled her to grasp the diversity of experiences among Syrian refugees, who come from very different backgrounds, and to pick up on tensions between locals and refugees, which would not necessarily become obvious by merely talking to people.

FS: I wanted to end with a few brief questions on outreach. You argued at one point that we now live in an information society where freedom from information has become a scarce resource (Eriksen 2001: 3). I am wondering against this background what you consider good forms of outreach? Should we be on social media such as Twitter, Facebook? Should we take part in the fast-paced cacophony on-line?

THE: Honestly, it shouldn't be our main priority, but we do not really have a choice, do we? At least, we have to find a balance and we should insist that anthropology is nowadays a kind of counter-culture, standing against the acceleration and the fragmentation of knowledge. The highest form of anthropological publishing remains the monograph, which demands something difficult not just of the author, but also of the reader. As a counter-culture at an accelerated time, we have to relate to the electronic media, but what we ultimately represent is something much slower. We should help the world to slow down.

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