Anthropology, humanism and civic responsibilities: a conversation with Thomas Hylland Eriksen

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SUMMARY:

Thomas Hylland Eriksen is amongst the most prolific anthropologists of our days. His work, however, does not only address specialised audiences; he is also a leading example of public engagement in Norway and beyond and an author who finds social value in the popularisation of science. Juggling conventional academic work and active participation in the public arena is a challenging task, but Eriksen's career demonstrates that these activities can not only be compatible, but also complementary. Through his work on the fields of ethnicity, nationalisms and globalization Eriksen has made substantial contributions to social theory and cross-disciplinary academic debate; out of his concern with the role of anthropology in society and his understanding of civic responsibility in the contemporary polity, he has also shown how anthropological knowledge can positively feed into public debate. In this conversation we shall learn more about Eriksen's anthropological work, views on current issues and personal experiences as a public academic.

KEY WORDS:

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, anthropology, public engagement, social theory

LUIS FERNANDO ANGOSTO FERRÁNDEZ [LFAF][1]: I should like to structure this conversation in two sections. The I would like us to discuss aspects of your public engagement in Norway and your views on the role that anthropologists in general can play in the public arena. In the second section we will discuss some theoretical issues related to your own work and, more broadly, to the anthropological discipline.

Something struck me while reading some of your recent work. You remark that in Norway it has been relatively common that anthropologists speak and write in the media, or at any rate beyond the walls of academic cloisters. You have also discussed pros and cons of this type of expert engagement – we'll come back to this later on. But an initial question to be made, a question that will surely interest anthropologists concerned the role of our discipline in the contemporary world, is: what is behind the fact that the opinion of anthropologists has had a relatively important presence in in Norwegian media?

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN [THE]: It's not easy to look for a single answer to this. Indeed, there are a number of factors involved. One is that anthropology has been a very healthy discipline in Norway almost since the 1950s, largely due to the influence of Fredrik Barth, who was Professor of Anthropology in Bergen. Although he did most of his fieldwork in the Middle East, and later in other parts of Asia, he was concerned that anthropology should play a role in Norwegian society. He gave public lectures and he even made a six-episode TV series where he spoke about his fieldwork and the wonders of anthropology. Very old-fashioned TV, by the way: he was just sitting in his office, behind his desk, showing slides from his fieldwork in New Guinea in the Swat Valley, and in Pakistan and so on, and talking about the lives of others.

LFAF: That was played on public TV?

THE: Yes, on public TV, and we only had one TV channel at the time – this was in 1979 – so everybody was watching it. For a short while he was a public celebrity: when he took the tram or went out on the street people would come up to him. This only lasted for a few months in the late 1970s, but it had its impact. For example, it stimulated my own interest in anthropology. In other words, there is a tradition there. On the other hand, another of my professors, Arne Martin Klausen, was con-

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1. This interview was conducted in Brisbane (Australia) on 27 September 2013.

cerned with getting the cultural dimension properly embedded in foreign development aid. He wanted the engineers and all the experts who went out to, say, help African countries develop, to understand that building a road in Sudan is very different from building a road in India, because you have to deal with local people, and local people are different. So he gave courses to development aid people and wrote critical analyses of failed development schemes. In other words, when I started to study in the early 1980s we had an ambiance in Norwegian anthropology where going out to the public was not seen as dangerous; it didn't make you lose your credibility, as long as you did your academic and professional work properly. As for myself, I always felt that my own work shouldn't just be academic. I also want to engage with non-academics. I give talks in all kinds of settings to non-academics, anything from the local Rotary club to bureaucrats in the public sector and pensioners associations around the country. And I talk about anthropological issues. I find that it's become more and more necessary for us, and more and more important politically as well as existentially, to get the message across that people live in different life-worlds, that cultural differences are real, and that everybody is not ultimately going to be, say, neoliberal Norwegian individualists.

LFAF: In relation to these issues you published your book *Engaging Anthropology* (2006), discussing, among other things, why our discipline has lost presence in current public debates despite its potential and uniqueness. Indeed, you encourage colleagues to step forward in those debates, but do so while being well aware that this type of engagement can be accompanied by controversies and difficult moments at a personal (Eriksen, 2003). Against this background, I wanted to ask you about the role of anthropologists in recent debates in Norway, particularly those circulating around the drama of last year's terrible massacre[2]. I assume that there must has been an eruption of opinions about the convenience or inconvenience of multicultural policies, diversity recognition...

THE: Yes, that's right. Several anthropologists have been engaged in the debates emerging in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, not just me. Several of us have spoken to and written in international press, but also and not least in the domestic media. One of my colleagues for example has written a lengthy essay in English on the rise of the extreme right wing, seen

2. Breivik's terrorist killings in Norway, in July 2011.

from the perspective of, you might say, the tension between nationalism and a more cosmopolitan worldview, which is really where much of the ideological conflict lies in European societies these days. But what I have found is that writing about multiculturalism, and writing about tolerance, diversity and similar topics from an anthropological perspective, has become more controversial in the last few years than it was in the 1990s. In the past, we were written off as "naïve multiculturalists" or, you know, "gullible people", that sort of thing, which is fine. Whereas in the last few years we're increasingly labelled as "traitors to the nation", "quislings", that kind of thing, which is a very different thing. But the message from anthropology has always been essentially the same, and it has been very consistent: we have to understand people's life worlds before passing judgement. After that, you must feel free to pass judgement as a political citizen; but ignorant prejudice is generally bad news.

LFAF: Are those efforts that you articulate along with others rendering positive results? Are you optimistic about the possibility of sending that anthropological message to society in terms that can be understood and used to inform larger discussions?

THE: Yes, but it has to be done in the right way. As a public anthropologist, it would not be very productive to assume the role of a teacher or guru who steps down to tell the truth to people. You must engage on an equal footing, in a democratic debate. And what our primary job is, at the end of the day, is to provide context and to provide knowledge, to make it possible for others to draw conclusions on a sounder basis than before. And one of my disappointments in the last few years has been the emergence of what you could call a generalised neoliberal view of the person, that is a strong version of individualism. There is an impatience now with people with other cultural backgrounds, "they should integrate fast, they should become like us"; efficient consumers, and so on. There is a very poor understanding, for example, of the importance of religion in many European societies these days; we seem to have forgotten how important religion used to be in Europe only a generation or two ago.

LFAF: At the same time you have discussed how religion, particularly Islam, has substituted for race as the main marker of difference in several parts of Europe (e.g. Eriksen, 2012). Muslims are nowadays at the centre of all these varied narratives of "othering". Why do you think that is so, and what is the effect that that is having in the Norwegian society?

THE: Of course this is not just a Norwegian issue. We've got it just like in other, especially north European societies. Southern Europe has a slightly different discourse about similarity and difference. There's also a geographical and historical proximity between Spain, for example, and Morocco, which makes for a different situation. But yes, why is it religion, and why Islam? There are several possible explanations for this. One of them has to do with the aftermath of the Salman Rushdie affair,…

LFAF: Rushdie's Norwegian editor was shot, wasn't he?

THE: Exactly. Incidentally he was my boss at the time, because I was the editor of a cultural journal published by the same publishing house, so I knew him well. He was probably shot because he was close to Salman Rushdie. Salman Rushdie came to Norway many times, and I met him during the *fatwa*. It all happened in a sort of secrecy. We didn't have a clue as to where we were going, we were just taken in a car somewhere, and driven out of town. Once he was way into the forest, in this kind of hunting castle like something out of one of his books; Salman Rushdie stood there, greeting us with security guards. Everything was very secret. And something happened around that time, without doubt, but the most important single event was clearly 9/11. And one thing about Islam and Christianity is that these two religions are somehow twin religions, they're very similar in some ways but have also been rivals, historically, for many centuries. And they both are proselytising religions, unlike other religions. It could probably be said that it is not feasible in the long run to represent a religion which monopolises truth for the entire global population in this shrinking world where we all have to be considerate and where tolerance is very important. So this goes both ways, regarding the situation with Muslims.
But it's also a fact that many of the working class immigrants in Northern Europe are Muslims, maybe the majority of non-European immigrants, and have increasingly emphasised their Muslim identity. Because it's a bit like what Hannah Arendt said about being a Jew: "if someone attacks me as a Jew, I have to defend myself as a Jew". So when the outside world makes them collectively more or less responsible for terrorism, fanaticism, riots and so on, then slowly many begin to see themselves as Muslims first. I have friends who are totally secular Muslims who live in Norway but who identify to some extent with this larger *Umma* or this larger community of Muslims because that's the way they're being identified by society. So there is this situation, which is what we call in anthro-

pology schismogenesis; there's a mutually strengthening and a deepening of these processes of exclusion.

The role of anthropology in this setting could be to tell other stories, to bring nuances, to show the diversity of what it means, for example, to be a Muslim. I've said many times that I have more in common with Muslim friends from my generation, because we read the same books, we listen to the same music, we may have the same political ideas, than I may have with some of my non-Muslim neighbours who vote for another party, who have different values, who don't care about global justice, who don't care about social equality and so on.

LFAF: And do you think that there might be another type of political process here, in this othering of Muslims? Because, as you have also mentioned elsewhere, the extreme right in some parts of Europe has to some extent abandoned religious hatred against Jews and actually support the state of Israel. There seems to be a salient political ingredient in that naturalisation of Muslim identities that accompanies that othering of Muslim people. Do you think that this could be an issue to be read in terms of the ideal of "good society" horizons that the right and the left might have in Europe at this stage of the 21st Century?

THE: Well, it's quite clear that these categories are being naturalised so that, structurally speaking, being Muslim is similar to what it was to be black. There is a belief in certain segments of society that, once you're a Muslim, that's your primary identity, that's what you basically are, and that you can never be fully integrated into society, you can never become a good democrat. And whether this is left or right is a bit unclear sometimes. Clearly you have right wing extremists, like the terrorist Breivik in Norway, and it's true that there were discussions on the Net, after the terrorist attack, between various factions of the extreme right wing where some were very angry with him saying "why did you kill people of your own race? You should've killed black bastards instead"; others said that Breivik is really working for Mossad and the Israeli, because "he loves Jews, so we can't trust him"; so, as you see, there continues to be an anti-Semitic right, and there are splinter groups on the extreme right wing.

LFAF: In relation to these issues, what was the position of the Progress Party in Norway after the terrible massacre? It has a very considerable parliamentary represenation and, like other extreme right wing parties in contempo-

rary Europe, the Progress Party is known for its growing concern with what we may call "cultural nationalism" and for its turning certain immigrants into scapegoats as soon as there is a social problem.

THE: They have had politicians who have said very irresponsible things, really stigmatising and denigrating generalisations about minorities, and it goes on after the attack. Some even presented themselves as the true victims of the terrorist attack by saying that "after Breivik, after the terrorist attack, it is now impossible to say the truth about Muslims, because others will associate you with this mad person". So they tried to present themselves as the true victims in order to get sympathy. As late as August this year (2012), a month ago as we are talking, one of the local politicians of the Progress Party in the west of the country posted on his Facebook wall the message "I hate Muslims". And the Party leadership didn't really sanction him for this, instead they said something along the lines of "maybe you should phrase it differently next time". There was just a mild reproach. Perhaps a quarter, maybe a third of the population, feel deeply resentful, feel that things are not going their way, and that government is actively working against them, and they often portray themselves as the true bearers of national interests. Some might, along these lines, argue that we have elites in the country who are secretly selling it out to the "Muslim invaders". In this I should confess that I find myself in a slightly unpleasant position, since I'm one of the main symbols for these people of everything that's gone wrong in Norway. Breivik himself, the terrorist, cites me several times during his manifesto, and in his YouTube video, as an example of how bad things are in Norway, because I had spoken at some point during the Cultural Complexity [CULCOM] project[3], about the need to deconstruct the majority. This statement was interpreted out there as a form of hate speech. Of course we weren't going to deconstruct anybody! It was about a certain way to carry out research, not a social reform program.

LFAF: It is striking to hear about how that type of intellectual work is being targeted as a threat by those who believe in the existence of a plot to collapse Western civilisation. In this political context, what has been the reception in Norway of the recently appointed Minister of Culture, Hadia Tajik, who is a Muslim woman?

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3. Information about the CULCOM research group at the Univertsity of Oslo can be found at https://www.uio.no/english/research/interfaculty-research-areas/culcom/

THE: You saw that? It's very interesting, and it's a very promising development, because Hadia Tajik represents exactly that kind of hybrid, ambiguous individual which is actually quite typical of the migrant "second generation". She grew up in a small place, she speaks a characteristic, West Norwegian dialect, so she can clearly be identified with a small place in western Norway. She rarely speaks about religion. She's more interested in issues of social equality, that's her main concern, social justice. And she has never seen herself as primarily a minority politician. This is something that bodes good for the future, because it tends to reduce polarisation. It's difficult for the extreme right wing to say that this woman is not integrated, because quite clearly in some ways she's better integrated than they are. She writes beautiful Norwegian, she's a good speaker, she's intelligent, she's well educated. There's nothing that can be picked on by xenophobic people except perhaps the fact that she's critical of the government of Israel – as many people are.

LFAF: Anything you would like to add before we close this part of the conversation?

THE: Yes. There are many ways of being a public anthropologist, one doesn't have to be in the media. There are other ways of working, as it were, in society. But, by exposing yourself through the media, you also have to be a bit thick skinned. When you present something in a seminar room, even if the people in the room think you're basically wrong, they would be polite, they would say "hmm, this was very interesting, but I have a question," something along those lines. Whereas if you write the same thing in the newspaper, you may soon find yourself at the receiving end of considerable aggression. And in this era of commentaries on the Net, and Facebook, and all these new media, you may even receive an avalanche of hatred. Academic colleagues who have experienced that without being prepared tend to be shocked, because the only thing they wanted to do in the first place was to present some of their research. For example, there was a young colleague who wrote recently an article about the fact that Oslo doesn't have any ghettos. His point was that even those suburbs that are dominated by minorities are very mixed, you have people from all over the world, and a few Norwegians, and they are part of greater society. Their inhabitants integrated in the city, they take the tube to go to work; they go to school, and so on. So it's not like some of those marginal suburbs in Paris, for example. So the only thing he wanted to do was to present his work, maybe with a touch of humanism,

as it were, because I think one of the underlying values of anthropology is a basic humanism: the idea that all human life has value. And then you're met with so much aggression and hatred, when the only thing you wanted to do was to be forthcoming and tell people about what you were doing! Many are not prepared for that type of reaction, and that's why I say you have to be a bit thick skinned in order to be a public anthropologist. In the 1990s it was different; it was a different decade, at least in my experience. There was more curiosity, more openness. Multiculturalism was generally seen as a good thing, because it brought us impulses from other parts of the world, in terms of food and music, and there was more tolerance. There's an impatience now, which is associated with the post-9/11 world, but also with the rise of neoliberalism. Impatience with alternative conceptualisations of the person. For example, you have minorities in which there is a strong emphasis on duties, rather than rights; you have duties towards your parents; you have duties towards God; there are certain things you seem to have to do … in the past, these groups might be praised by leaders of society for looking so well after their families. Not so any more.

LFAF: Something similar seems to happen with groups which stand by notions of gender complementarity, which you have elsewhere used as an example within this frame of discussion…

THE: Yes, and to defend this in the Norwegian public sphere (to give but one example) has become almost impossible, because then you seem to be a defender of an enforced marriage. So the neoliberal emphasis on the freedom of choice as that which constitutes the individual, as a free consumer in the shopping centre of life, as it were, has become totally hegemonic, and is very destructive for the future of cosmopolitan values. I mean, we have to accept that we live in a world where we are exposed to fairly profound difference; like it or not, we have to find ways of living with difference.

LFAF: On this note, and in relation to the CULCOM research group which you direct: what is in your opinion the role that a research group with an anthropological frame can actually play, in applied terms, in an European society, or indeed in any other society? Do you intend to contribute to policy making through your research, for instance? Do you design the production of your research in those terms?

THE: Partly. For me that is an underlying concern. I think about that when I write in Norwegian, and that is also why most of my publications from the period, from the CULCOM period, have been in Norwegian. Because we wanted to reach other Norwegian social scientists, the interested public, decision makers, bureaucrats, and not least the people whose life-worlds we described. And we did succeed, we were invited to several meetings with various government bodies who are working on issues to do with urban integration, cultural diversity, that sort of thing. And I think we had some impact by showing that we should not think of society as primarily consisting of ethnic groups. For example, because there is in many ways more diversity within the category of Pakistanis than there is between Norwegians and Pakistanis. So we brought some real complexity to this as well, and we also demonstrated how cultural complexity, in a modern society, applies just as much to the majority as to the minorities. And that's what I meant by talking about deconstructing the majority, showing that there are huge regional differences, significant class differences, and so on, as an antidote to the tendency to reify ethnic groups.

LFAF: And do you think that as an antidote to that type of reification, the popularisation of science, which is something that you have actually worked on a lot, can increase the practical impact that intellectuals can have in society? You have been recognised with important awards in Norway precisely for your contribution to that type of commitment. From your experience, are you optimistic in this regard? Many people seem to become sceptic about the potential of intellectual work and its potential practical impact. Even celebrity journalists who have enjoyed quite a lot of public presence at the heyday of their careers often appear to be sceptic, with hindsight, about the real effects of their work. Some of them have sent the message that one shouldn't overestimate the impact that they've made in society since, after all, decision making depends on power-holders and politicians who are not always permeable to intellectualised opinion. So what is your view on the role that the popularisation of science can play in educational terms? And what impact may it have in public decision-making?

THE: I think it can have a productive role, but of course we shouldn't overestimate our own potential. That would only lead to disappointment. And I think we should also be patient, we should think that if it doesn't work in the short run, you sow a seed, and sooner or later it may flourish. It can actually take a while. But yes, we do contribute, for exam-

ple, by shifting the terms of the discourse, by introducing new concepts, which may be contested in the beginning, and can even make people angry. We had a debate in Norway some ten years ago about the word "negro, *neger*." In Spanish 'negro' is less controversial, because it's just a colour, right? Whereas in English and Norwegian it designates a group, and it's considered pejorative. And many Norwegians would argue like "no it's not, it's a natural, it's just a normal word, we've always called black people *negers*". And some of us went out and tried to explain why this is demeaning and misleading, not least because black people don't necessarily have a lot in common; for instance, someone from Jamaica doesn't have a lot in common with someone from Kenya. And today hardly anybody says "*neger*," it's virtually gone out of use. But it took some years, and it was unpleasant. There were verbal fights over it, and lots of people were angry with us "silly, politically correct academics." But it did work in the end, so I think we do have a contribution to make. However, the results of what you do may not be what you expect. For example, my own work sometimes has been used to increase polarisation. The terrorist Breivik, and others on the extreme right, use people like me as symptoms of a kind of dangerous cosmopolitan, anti-national, immigrant-friendly tendency. There are people on Facebook who have accused me of being indirectly responsible for the terrorist attack because I have instilled so much hatred on the other side.

LFAF: That type of argument, in my view, is not only misleading but also dangerous. Silence and lack of civic discussion about important issues seem to generate negative results in the long term. In contemporary Spain, for example, we are seeing how, in the midst of a strong political and economic crisis, the lack of a more gradual and institutionally backed discussion of the historical memories and social effects of Franco's dictatorship appears as a social weakness; the long (and institutionally fostered) absence of an open dialogue seems to be one of the factors contributing to make readings of the present situation as resulting from a never-properly-healed national trauma, which adds extra strees to the country's situaion. In itself, silence does not guarantee that problems disappear.

THE: I agree, and it's always the easiest way out, just to say nothing and hope that these things will pass. Terrible things happen around us, and silence does not help. Like in any country, even in peaceful Norway we have human rights violations, when underage refugees are being evicted from the country, for example, for of some bureaucratic reason. It's al-

ways easiest to keep quiet. So we need civil courage, and anthropologists have never been very good at that. Possibly because of our methodological cultural relativist bias we're a bit aloof as it were, from the world, because we tend to see everything simultaneously from the outside and from the inside. But in the 21st Century we can't afford to be, because we swim in this world of frictions and of connectedness, which has increasingly somehow become one place.

LFAF: Let us continue with a move towards theory- and methodology-oriented discussion. You have emphasised the importance of studying and talking about "majority cultures", of researching them from anthropological perspectives. Can you mention examples of that type of research currently being undertaken in Norway, Europe or elsewhere?

THE: I could mention many examples of that. But we have to keep what I think are the main virtues of anthropology, which is also where we still are a critical and sometimes subversive discipline. We need to keep going deeply into people life worlds. We do those things which cannot be done and said by anybody else in the social sciences, because they use other, less refined methods. There are of course some limitations to the ethnographic method, because when you've got this little, compact piece of high-octane ethnography, the question is how to generalise and connect it to broader processes. Some of the first really good studies of majorities that I came across were some studies on nationalism in Europe that came out of a group supervised by Ernest Gellner at the LSE in the 1980s, and some by Edwin Ardener's students in Oxford around the same time. They published innovative anthropological work on the Welsh, on the Bretons and so on. Ok, they were minorities, but still very large populations; and at the time, there were also some who worked on the French and the Germans, Diana Forsythe wrote about German self-understanding, for example. This was all based on fieldwork, but they also had to use other methods, as we all do; you use statistics when you have them, and you usually do, of various kinds; you use the media to be able to gauge what kind of discourse there is and what are people interested in, what they talk about, and how they talk about it. Nowadays we can use the so-called social media (a hopeless term, by the way, since all media are in a sense social), Facebook and so on, and various other methods in order to contextualise that little compact bit of ethnography and anchor it better in larger frame and make it speak to larger issues.

LFAF: We have heard you recently talking about "overheating" as a concept that can be used for the analysis of certain aspects of globalization[4]. And it is not the first time you resort to generating concepts in order to establish grounds for research. While at the Free University in Amsterdam you were working with a research group around the concept of "human security". You seem to be fond of these type of concepts in order to set research parameters. Can you explain what is the value that you find in that type of conceptual strategy at the beginning of a research project?

THE: I can say that in a very simple way: I've always been attracted to ambitious, overarching comparative concepts which make people's life worlds in very different parts of the planet speak to each other. We have a number of comparative concepts in anthropology, though they're all being criticised of course: ethnicity, kinship, etc… Rodney Needham and David Schneider, two leading authorities on kinship studies, said around the same time that there is no such thing as a kinship system since everything is locally defined. So there is this constant tension within anthropology between the particular and the universal. But you can't just keep to the particular, because then we end up just writing analytical, refined travel stories about life elsewhere, just showing that it is very diverse. So in order to generate some more useful accounts, more powerful explanatory accounts of the human condition, and not to just understand particular life worlds, we obviously need broad comparative concepts, although naturally they must be used with caution.

For instance, with the concept of "human security" which I have worked with recently, the idea is that people everywhere somehow relate to human security. But perhaps there are situations where "security" is not the concern, indeed there will be contexts where people feel that there's too much security, and where security is seen as a factor which limits freedom. I just read this paper abstract, at the AAS conference, on the absence of a discourse on climate change in Nepal. Some people don't talk about climate change; they talk about local environmental issues instead, which are manageable, which is interesting. But we need the concept of climate change, among other things, in order to make sense of its absence. Today, since the world is so incredibly interconnected, we can actually use some empirical generalisations about the contemporary world and study them through their local effects. For example, it is highly likely that we'll produce a book, when we get going properly with this

4. In a talk entitled 'The three crises of globalization' given at the Australian Anthropological Society 2012 conference (hosted by the University of Queensland).

new project, about the role of the Chinese in all our diverse field locations. Because the Chinese are now present, and make their presence felt, in most societies in the world, in one way or another, because of their expanding economy. And that's an empirical thing, and it's the kind of thing that's interesting to explore anthropologically and which tells us something about the differences and similarities between different communities and life worlds. So I'm all for trying out as many comparative concepts as possible and see how far they get you.

LFAF: You've also been keen to develop theoretical discussion in our discipline, about which you have written a remarkable history (Eriksen, 2001). In my view, something salient in your approach these theoretical discussions is that you analyse social theory in general and anthropological theory in particular as interconnected with a larger social frame. And I think it is most important to identify how there are shifts in the production of social theory that relate to shifts in the forms of globalisation in which we live. For instance, you just mentioned the way in which neoliberalism pervades notions of personhood, for instance, but of course it is possible to go further and argue that it pervades entire epistemes. In this regard, and in the field where you have actually conducted a large part of your work, the field of ethnicity, you have noted how there was at some stage in the history of our discipline a total shift towards emphasising mobility of boundaries, things in flux, movement; everything seemed then to be somewhat malleable and situational regarding ethnicity. That shift was succeeding essentialist and primordial notions of ethnicity, and pervaded the social sciences in general.

THE: Yes, and this is fascinating. Not least because we're interested in the history of our own discipline and in the history of social thought. It is very easy to see, with hindsight, that concepts emerge, and particular ways of looking at the world emerge, not in a vacuum: they emerge as a response to a particular historical situation. A good share of social theory grew out of, initially, the transition from agrarian society to industrial society, and the problems of urbanisation and industrialisation and what they did to people. The Marxian concept of alienation was there, and it was also applied by other social scientists; the Durkheimian notion of anomie, for example, came as well, along with Tönnies "Gemeinschaft" and "Gesellschaft" and so on. In anthropology, the idea of primitive society – the more or less isolated, traditional, non-literate, stateless society – became central to the development of the discipline.

LFAF: And that idea of primitive societies had concrete epistemological basis and consequences, didn't it? That "island metaphor" that you wrote about (see Eriksen, 1993)…

THE: Exactly. The island metaphor seemed to work really well for a while because it showed how the different bits of a society fit together; whether you were a structural functionalist or not, you could see the totality of a society. But very soon the limitations of this approach also became apparent, because one began to see the connections, and one began to see how internal diversity was generated, both by internalised and external forces. But we still need to work on what we may call a post- Durkheimian vocabulary for talking about the social, which is not anchored in the transition to industrial society in Europe. I mean, a vocabulary for talking about the transition to the global information society. And we are getting there, we have a number of concepts such as the ones you mentioned that have to do with flow, flux and so on, but they always have to be thought of dialectically. I always tell my students: "when you think you've found something, look for the opposite, because you'll find that as well". There is tension, and there are conflicting tendencies everywhere.

LFAF: Don't you think that this emphasis on mobility, flux, flow and so on, and on situationalism and intersectionality, which became essential to understand identities nowadays, may have detached anthropologists in particular and many social scientists in general from looking for causalities? It seems to me that very often we accept that something exists in the world, but we are not really asking anymore "where is it coming from"? What is your view on that?

THE: I agree, I think we should probably be more theoretically ambitious in terms of looking for explanations. And not forgetting some of the virtues that anthropology used to have in an earlier period, before the interpretive turn held sway. I was all for the interpretive turn, but maybe it was taken too far. When I started to study anthropology in the early 1980s we were still interested in economic systems, kinship systems, politics. At a certain point during the 1990s, suddenly everybody was studying identity and I probably encouraged that among my students, but it went too far. For example, in order to understand what's going on in north Africa and the Middle East, we have to realise that the economic system is still one based on a kind of feudalism. They haven't really made the transition to what Jack Goody calls national capitalism, as we did in

Europe, and that goes a long way to explain what's happening. Libyan society is fundamentally based on kinship, that is where people have their rights and obligations, their social capital, and the people they can trust. In our part of the world, it tends to be a "what" rather than a "who" when it comes to trust, and the difference is crucial. Yet – alas – it tends to be ignored by policy analysts.

And we mustn't forget this when we make comparisons, that everything is not becoming the same, the entire world is not neoliberal. And this is another area where anthropological understanding is crucial, both in terms of the broader discourse about society and scientifically, as a corrective to, for example, quantitative sociologists, who tend to concentrate on that which can be measured. It is no coincidence that it was an anthropologist – Keith Hart – who discovered the "informal sector" in the economy, which is so important to people everywhere in the world.

LFAF: Along these lines, and concretely with regards to the explosion of scholarly and political focus on identities that took place in the 1990s, there are a good few authors who recognise there the influence of the contextual forces that pervaded the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent heyday of neoliberalism. And that was all there indeed. In addition, if we just look backwards a little bit, whenever social scientists started to talk about ethnicity, there was another historical context. After the Second World War in particular concepts such as "race", an even that which we may call "the tribal world" started to vanish from academic jargon and theories, and the supposed empirical realities that those concepts named started to be approached through new conceptual lenses. Though causalities behind the Second World War laid elsewhere, "race" had an articulating role on its drama and certainly on the persecution of the Jews, who were racialised and criminally targeted by Nazism. After that, twentieth century anthropological ideas about culture seemed to gradually take over the realm of the social sciences when it came to explain human difference. In that context we see that, for instance, ethnicity also gradually starts to take shape as a concept for public records such as national censuses. So we see that particular political contexts certainly influence the emergence of new concepts and theories. If we bring these ideas into the analysis of the contemporary period, many questions raise. Now that, as you have pointed out, globalisation brings, to some degree at least, common cultural features to a lot of people, everyone seems to pursue being different, and social scientists seek to conceptualise that. In your opinion, what is behind this phenomenon of identity differentiation? Do you think that there

is a thing such a thing as a "human need" behind the current concern with individual and collective differentiation?

THE: I think that's a crucial question. I feel that if we renew anthropology in the right way, it could continue to play an essential, and probably an even more important role nowadays, than it did in the 1930s and 40s when anthropology sort of just came back from the field with fresh stories about remote peoples whom nobody else had visited. Now we have informants who speak back, you need informed consent. Think about it – Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard could just print photos of anybody, and say anything about anybody, without asking for permission, a practice that would now be condemned as ethically indefensible and also practically impossible. So we're all part of the same world in a sense, and we're getting to a point where we need to have a global conversation about what it means to be human, which incorporates difference but also similarity. And why is it that there is currently this craze for difference? Well, I think it has a lot to do with a need for autonomy at the individual level, really: "who am I?" and "what does the word 'we' mean?". It is the most fundamental question of social philosophy, "what is the meaning of the word 'we'?" And as you and I know, it's situational, there are concrete "we's" and there are abstract "we's" and so the response shifts contextually and situationally. And why does everybody, apparently, want to be different? Well, because of the need to have a feeling of autonomy and self-determination: "I want to decide who I am, I don't want anybody from outside to tell me who I am." So in the 1980s when the hijab became widespread in the Muslim middle classes as a result of urbanisation and education, people became highly self-conscious about who they were, because they were confronted with difference and felt the pressure to adjust, which they resisted. Around the same time, folk dresses became common in Norway, which is something I've written about. No coincidence. When I grew up in the 1970s people in Norway generally wanted to be modern, we wanted to be like the Swedes and the Americans, you know. So you wanted to have a nice dress, a modern dress, when you went out to celebrate the national feast of Constitution Day, and suddenly – in the space of a decade – they all seemed to have been replaced by traditionalist folk dresses. And it's about, "well nowadays we are postmodern people, we use computers, we eat at McDonalds and we watch the same American TV series as everybody else, but we haven't forgotten who we are and where we're coming from"; that's the essential message.

LFAF: In your view, the proposals of social biologists who talk about how this eruption of identities at present ultimately relates to forms of kin selection is an avenue worth pursuing?

THE: I'm one of those anthropologists who have what I would call a fairly relaxed relationship to social biology and evolutionary psychology, though they always oversell their findings and tend to be poor listeners. I mean, they discover something and they say "I've got this lens through which I'm looking at the world and I can see everything, and everything else is rubbish, it's social constructivism, and postmodernism, and what-not". I don't buy that. But I can also see that sometimes they have a point. And we should take into account that, as Bourdieu once said, "people know what they're doing, and they know something about why they're doing it, but they don't necessarily know *what what they do does*". So we don't necessarily understand the full causes and the full implications of our own actions. There are powerful underlying forces that are not reflexive, and are not discursive, and I for one am more convinced by the evolutionary account than by the psychoanalytical one.

LFAF: Would you like to finalise this conversation with any comment or addition?

THE: I'd like to, yes. Since we began to speak about the role of anthropology in the broader world, my feeling is that we should become better communicators, we should become even more skilled at listening to others, trying to speak a more comprehensible language, leaving the jargon and tribal language behind. There's not much to be lost there, I think we can do that. And if we can do that, anthropology has an important sort of 'civilising' mission, it is my feeling. In Norway, all university students have to take a small course in the history of philosophy, and a bit of philosophy of science, before embarking on their study proper. No matter whether you're going to do engineering or medicine or law, you have to learn about Plato and Kant and that sort of thing, it's the German idea of "*Bildung*" you know, that's a part of your broader education. I think the term "*educación*" in Spanish is used in a similar way sometimes, by the way. And nowadays, a similar course in anthropology might actually have performed a similar task. I think everybody could have taken half a year of anthropology, and then move on do other things. It's not a realistic proposition, and I'm probably not going to propose it seriously. But the point is that there are certain things that only we seem to be saying

about human diversity. The need to have some insight into the human condition, in order to be able to navigate in this complex world without too much friction, without too many collisions, is absolutely essential in this overheated world. So it's a truly civilising mission in that way.

LFAF: In that regard, by the way, it seems very important to know how to interact with the outside of the academia, as you have often emphasised. Here we develop certain codes of discourse and precision in argumentation, but when engaging with other types of discussions one needs to read and communicate in other codes and generate some sort of media savvy, for instance. I liked reading your quote from Einstein along the lines that we need to know how to present things as simply as possible, but not simpler than that. We can really get it wrong if we make things simpler than they can possibly be.

THE: We can indeed. And that is what irritates so many of us with the socio-biologists, who seem to offer very simple answers to exceedingly complex questions. Sometimes we might be better off simplifying things, it might be for us a bit bolder in drawing conclusions, but that too shouldn't be taken too far. As Einstein is reputed to have said: Make it as simple as possible, but not simpler.

LFAF: We could leave that as a conclusion for the day. Thanks a lot for sharing your ideas and reflections, Thomas.

THE: It was a pleasure.

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