



The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Born (1962)



Thomas Hylland Eriksen is a Norwegian anthropologist. Born in 1962, he has written extensively about such themes as identity, ethnicity, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, globalisation, climate change, migration and human rights. He is currently Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oslo and is well-known in Norway as a public intellectual and commentator.

On his website (www.hyllanderiksen.net), Eriksen states: *'my work is motivated by a triple concern: to understand the present world, to understand what it means to be human, and to help bring about social and environmental change.'*

Overheating

Eriksen's most recent work is centred on the concept of overheating. (See his blog for an introduction to this book) He suggests that the world is overheated. Change has been happening *'too fast, unequal and uneven'*. *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* is based on the assumption that the fast changes characterising the present age have important, sometimes dramatic and unintended consequences. Each of the five chapters focuses on one key area – energy, cities, mobility, waste, information – and shows how changes may occur, which were neither foreseen nor desired at the outset. He argues that the accelerated and intense pace of globalisation has led to three main problems. These problems relate to:

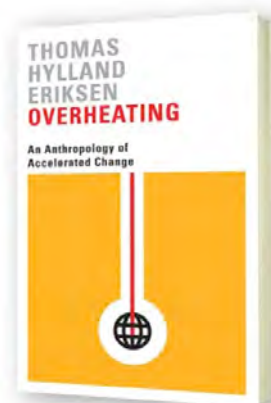
1. cultural identity
2. the economy
3. the physical environment

People across the world are finding it more difficult to define who they are in traditional ways, leading to a conflict in their sense of identity. They are struggling to sustain themselves economically in ways that they are used to. Thirdly, they are dealing with changes in the physical environment that are making traditional practices and lifestyles unsustainable.

Eriksen is interested in how people deal with the impact of rapid globalisation at local level. He argues that large-scale global changes lead to instability and uncertainty at local level, which cause people to experience feelings of alienation and powerlessness. He believes that the overheating effect of rapid global change leads to a feeling of crisis in localities which struggle to maintain their institutions and practices.

To quote Eriksen directly,

It is an interconnected world, but not a smoothly and seamlessly integrated one. Rights, duties, opportunities and constraints continue to be unevenly distributed, and the world itself is fundamentally volatile and contradiction-ridden. The most fundamental contradiction, perhaps, consists in the chronic tension between the universalising forces of global modernity and the autonomy of the local community or society.



Globalisation and cultural identity

Eriksen points to the rapid pace of population growth in a comparatively short time as an example of how dramatically the world has changed. Between 1800 and 1920, the world's population rose from 1 billion to two billion people; in the century since then it has grown to 7 billion people. In parallel with this surge in population growth, Eriksen suggests that *'the steady acceleration of communication and transportation of the last two centuries has facilitated contact and made isolation difficult, and is weaving the growing global population ever closer together, without erasing cultural differences, local identities and power disparities.'* Therefore, a consequence of both the rapid growth of population and the transformation of communications technology over such a short time period is that groups who are bound by a sense of common identity can feel alienated and threatened, and are likely to emphasise their distinctive identity more assertively.

It is interesting to see how Eriksen's response to the UK vote in 2016 to withdraw from the EU offers us further evidence of his thinking. Rather than dismiss the vote as evidence of small-minded nationalism, xenophobia or bigotry, Eriksen has commented on the different shades of the anti-EU vote in Britain, which includes leftists, those opposed to the marketisation of Europe and those who are alienated from the EU model. He also situates the vote in the context of the increased distance between the power holders and those they are supposed to be representing and people's sense of powerlessness. Eriksen sees the opportunity in Brexit to find a way of responding to what he calls *'crises of legitimacy'* experienced by political and economic elites in the western world.



"The most general piece of advice if the goal is to avoid global disaster and cool down the humanly induced runaway processes currently threatening planetary health, consists in scaling down (and slowing down)."

Thomas
Hylland
Eriksen

Chronic tensions: economic development and human sustainability

Eriksen also demonstrates how contradictions are at the heart of economic development. A consequence of 21st century capitalism is that policy makers and political leaders are driven to making trade-offs between, on the one hand, responsible environmental policies and, on the other hand, profit-driven economic policies. Therefore, while there exists a broad consensus at policy-making level that climate change is a reality and that the consumption by humans of fossil fuels is a major factor in causing this change, yet economic practices that contribute to this change continue to be advocated. Paradoxically, practices such as fossil fuel consumption, overfishing, air pollution in cities and the depletion of phosphorous continue, with the resultant ecological damage threatening the very existence of those who seek to sustain economic growth and profit-making.

'Caused by agricultural expansion, climate change and pollution, the loss of biodiversity is an excellent, if frightening, example of 'overheating': It is an unintended consequence of the planet having been filled slowly to the brim by human activities and projects. It is not caused by one single factor possible to contain or control, but by the confluence of several mutually reinforcing processes – population growth, land clearing and monocultures, global neoliberalism and fossil fuel use, to mention a few major factors'.
(Eriksen's blog, 13/8/2016)

Cultural Complexity in the New Norway (CULCOM)

Between 2004 and 2010, Eriksen was involved in a major research project that focused on key themes in his thinking. The project, entitled 'Cultural Complexity in the New Norway' (CULCOM), investigated social and cultural dynamics in Norway through exploring how groups and individuals defined themselves and how they were defined from the outside, looking at such contexts as immigration, education and labour markets. Like 'Overheating', the project was interested in how tensions and opposing forces affected people's identity. It considered how processes of social integration happen simultaneously with those of fragmentation and differentiation; and happen at different levels, (ranging from the family to the nation-state); and in different arenas, (schools, workplaces, law, cultural life). The project explores how these complex factors affect ideas around identity in contemporary Norway at a time of increased social and cultural complexity. This project provides evidence of Eriksen's key themes: how identity is shaped, tensions between integration and fragmentation; the complex interplay of social, political, cultural, and religious factors in shaping modern society; and the diverse ways in which global trends are perceived, understood and responded to in different settings.. This theme is neatly summarised in a quote from the CULCOM website: *'Being a Turk in Norway is significantly different from being a Turk in Germany.'*

Clashing scales-thinking about the EU

Eriksen suggests that the crises of globalisation have also led to what he calls *'a series of clashing scales'*. He explains this idea with some examples:

'If you are in a powerful position, you can change thousands of people's lives far away with a stroke of a pen; but if you spent time with them first, that is likely to influence your decision. The tangibly lived life at the small scale, in other words, clashes with large-scale decisions, and you come to realise that what is good for Sweden is not necessarily good for the residents of the village of Dalby.'

This tension between the perspective of those in power who control large scale projects and decisions and those living with the impact of these decisions is well articulated here:

'Your average body temperature may be just fine if your feet are in a freezer while your head is in a hot stove, but you're dead nonetheless. And in order to get to the truth about people's lives, the bird's eye perspective is useful, but inadequate.'
(Eriksen's blog, 13/8/2016)

This tension, he suggests, is a growing feature of the EU model. Eriksen argues that, since the introduction of the single currency, there has been a disregard for the need to take care of small-scale concerns at local, regional or state levels. He claims that there is a clashing scales gap in the EU between the Commission and the community, leading to people feeling disenfranchised. He says that clashes of scale are a feature of global neo-liberalism, where there is a loss of subsidiarity - in other words, where people at local level feel that they have no democratic power.

Eriksen advises that the European Union needs to be more respectful of multiple identities and recognise the needs of citizens to feel that they have power over their destinies. He cites the words of the anthropologist Anthony Wallace in relation to culture when suggesting that the desired model of governance of the EU should not be *'the replication of uniformity but the organisation of diversity'*.