

# The place of anthropology in an overheated world

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## INTRODUCTION

Across the world there is a widespread feeling that we – humanity – live in a time of transition, although there is no general agreement, among social scientists or others, as to what kind of transition we currently experience and what will be its ultimate outcome. And not least, there is no general agreement about the addressee for attributions of responsibility, or blame, for the changes, and what to do about their consequences. This is not just about climate change, although that is arguably the most momentous and consequential change we are facing unless we change course.

Accelerated change can be identified in a number of areas. The most familiar exponential growth curve of the last century was that of global population growth. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, global population stood at about 1.5 billion. By the end, it had grown to nearly 7 billion. While it took humanity a couple of hundred thousand years to reach the first billion, it subsequently took only two centuries to increase sevenfold.

However, there is accelerated change all around us. There are more of us, and each of us is on the average more mobile and active, and has more connections with others – is hooked up to more networks – than ever before. Earlier eras were, without exception, slower eras for the majority of humanity.

In this sense, we presently live on an overheated planet (see [www.uio.no/overheating](http://www.uio.no/overheating)). In physics, heat is simply a synonym for speed, and translated into the language of social science, overheating can refer to accelerated change. Moreover, we have long been aware that the changes brought about by modernity have unintended, often paradoxical consequences, and when changes accelerate, so do the unintentional side-effects of changes.

Overheating responses – local reactions to accelerated change – can be observed almost everywhere in the world, but in different domains and expressed very differently due to the variations in local circumstances, both material, social and cultural. Typically, people perceive that some change or another is taking place really fast. However, they may reflect, ‘nobody asked me for my opinion’, adding: ‘Who should I blame, who can I trust, and

what can I do?’ In a situation of overheating, this is an emblematic reaction. An obvious task for social scientists consists in exploring the modes of blaming at work locally, a kind of research with obvious political implications. For example, it makes a great difference whether people blame/trust a ‘who’ or a ‘what’; a person or a structure or institution. It also makes a difference whether they can blame a local or domestic entity – a person or an institution – or whether the blame for your problems lies abroad. In upland Sierra Leone, when unexpected change happens – say, a huge biofuel plantation suddenly appears just across the river – people may shrug and say that ‘it’s the global’. The task for social science consists in unpacking this term, finding out what locals mean by ‘the global’ and how it is connected to their world-view, both in a literal and a figurative sense, and to their worlds of experience and prospects. If, for example, the water shortage in a town in the Andes can be attributed to the nearby mining company, the latter can be held accountable. But if the cause is not deemed to be the resource use associated with mining, but global climate change, it is far more difficult for the locals to know what to do. They may even begin to look for a local scapegoat.

One generic characteristic of overheating is a lack of predictability. There seems to be no script guiding humanity into the next stage, as it were, of modernity, no hegemonic narrative telling us where we are going. This century is one where it will be demanded of humanity, collectively and locally, to ‘rebuild the ship at sea’ in order to avoid the collapse of the world as we know it. The most significant looming danger is that of global climate change, but it needs to be understood in its full context.

## ACCELERATED CHANGE

As pointed out by Charles Tilly in an early critique of methodological nationalism in sociology (Tilly 1984), the period in which he wrote was more interconnected than any earlier humanly produced world.

*A sensible rule of thumb for connectedness might be that the actions of powerholders in one region of a network rapidly (say within a year) and visibly (say in*

*changes actually reported by nearby observers) affect the welfare of at least a significant minority (say a tenth) of the population in another region of the network. Such a criterion indubitably makes our own world a single system; even in the absence of worldwide flows of capital, communications, and manufactured goods, shipments of grain and arms from region to region would suffice to establish the minimum connections. (Tilly 1984: 62)*

Thirty years later, we may safely confirm that the tendency invoked by Tilly has continued. No matter how you go about measuring degrees of interconnectedness in the contemporary world, the only possible conclusion is that many more people today are much more connected than ever before in history. There are more of us, and each of us has, on average, more links to the outside world than our predecessors, through business travel, information, communication, migration, vacations, political engagement, trade, development assistance, exchange programmes and so on. The number of transatlantic telephone lines has grown phenomenally in the last few decades; so has the number of Websites and international NGOs.

In the context of anthropological research, it may be pointed out that the same increased connectivity which is the focus of research on transnationalism was, slightly earlier, a cause of decolonization and the emergence of a postcolonial sensitivity which in turn led to what many saw as a crisis of representation in anthropology (Fabian 1983, Clifford and Marcus 1986). A source of regret for many anthropologists, it may also be seen as a situation which creates new opportunities for comparative research, as people across the world cease to be mere consociates, but become true contemporaries (cf Geertz 1957), aware – however dimly – of each other and of the broader processes within which their lives unfold, sharing a seamless world not only with each other, but also with the anthropologist writing about their life-worlds.

The most striking graphic representation of the processes of change characteristic of the current era is the exponential growth curve (Eriksen 2001). In its most familiar version, it depicts world population growth, brought to the attention of policy-makers

not least through the neo-Malthusian Club of Rome's report *Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972), which advocated population control as one of several methods for preventing serious resource scarcity in the future. From a global environmental perspective, the concern expressed by the Club of Rome is easily understandable. Many have argued that it is unlikely to be possible, economically and ecologically, to offer the majority of the current world population – and it is expected to reach nine billion in 2050 – resort holidays by jet, a family car and everything they desire in the realm of iGadgets and the like. Alternatives pursued by activists, politicians and planners include acceptance of widespread poverty, bracing for an ecological catastrophe, promoting population reduction, or replacing consumerism with one or several alternative views of the good life.

However, growth is exponential in a number of realms, and population is growing less fast than a number of other phenomena. Of course, the proportion of the world's population with access to the Internet has grown extremely fast since 1990, as very few used Internet at the time. But that growth has accelerated since the turn of the century. As late as 2006, it was estimated that between one and two per cent of the Sub-Saharan African population (with the exception of South Africa) had reasonably regular access to the Internet. By 2012, the proportion was estimated at slightly over 15 per cent (Internet World Stats 2013). The simple explanation is that millions of Africans now have smartphones with easy access to the Web and email.

Or one could look at transnational migration in areas which 'feel the heat': When, in 1990, I began to write about cultural diversity in Norway, there were 200,000 immigrants in the country (which had a total population of 4.5 million, now >5 million). By late 2013, the figure was 700,000 (including children of two immigrants), and the growth curve of the last decade is – accordingly – steep. In the same period, urbanization in the global south has also set in a new gear, and cities like Nouachott (Mauretania) and Mogadishu (Somalia) have grown from a couple of hundred thousand to a couple of million inhabitants; in other words, they

have grown a thousand per cent in about 25 years (Davis 2006).

Or, again, one could look at international tourism as an indicator of accelerated change. As early as the late 1970s, there were North Europeans who spoke about parts of the Spanish coast as being 'spoiled by mass tourism'. However, in 1978, soon after the end of Fascism in the country, Spain received a grand total of 15 million tourist arrivals a year. In 2013, the figure is estimated at 60 million; in other words, tourism in the country has grown fourfold in 35 years. On a global basis, the UN organization WTO (World Tourism Organization) has estimated more than a billion international tourist arrivals in 2013.

Websites, international organizations (as well as international conferences and workshops), mobile telephones and TV sets, private cars and text messages: The growth curves point sharply upwards in all of these domains (and many others). In 2003, Facebook did not yet exist. Ten years later, the platform reached 1.1 billion user accounts. The figure is all the more impressive considering that the Chinese, who alone represent 17 per cent of the world's population, are for reasons of political censorship not represented.

Of course, everything everywhere does not accelerate in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and not everything that grows fast has profound local consequences. Local or regional deceleration is also a possible consequence of globalized acceleration. Moreover, although phenomena such as text messages and tourism, Facebook and cable TV have transformed contemporary lives in ways which are still only partly understood by researchers, it is the interrelationship between two processes of change which are especially consequential for the present and near future of humanity, namely population growth and the growth in energy use.

Since we are now seven times as many as we were around the time of the Napoleonic Wars, it comes as no surprise that we use more energy today. However, the growth in global energy use has been much faster than the growth in population. In 1820, each of us used, on an average, 20 Gigajoules a year. Roughly two centuries later, the figure is 80 GJ, chiefly due to the technology making it possible to exploit fossil fuels on a large scale. As is well known, energy use is far from evenly



distributed between and within societies, and it has been estimated that those who live in rich countries have access, on an average, to machine power equivalent to a situation where every individual had 25 slaves.

The fourfold growth mentioned is in reality a growth by a factor of 28, since there are seven times as many of us now as in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only since 1975, world energy consumption has been doubled. The unintended consequences are well known. Those which are visible and subject to immediate experience are pollution and environmental deterioration. The long-term, large-scale effects, more difficult to observe and understand, are changes in the global climate.

One may well speculate that if world population had not started to grow exponentially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, we might have evaded the most serious unintended consequences of the fossil fuel revolution. Lovelock (2006) once remarked that if world population today had only been around a billion, we might have been able to do 'pretty much as we liked', and the planet would still have recovered. Similarly it is possible to speculate, even if the scenario is unrealistic, a sevenfold increase in world population without the fossil fuel revolution. In that case, the climate crisis would also have been avoided, but instead, the majority of humanity would in all likelihood have eked out a living only barely covering their basic needs. Instead, our shared planet is one where modernity has gone into overdrive, where there is full

speed ahead in many, interconnected domains. The human consequences of this accelerated change should be an area of priority for anthropological research.

#### **AN OVERHEATED WORLD**

The contemporary world is an overheated world, above all defined through tensions and frictions. The networks connecting people are denser, faster and more consequential than before. The transnational Islamist movement, the green movement and critics like ATTAC and Occupy all attempt to show that another world is possible. The first rule of urban traffic planning is that speed requires space, and traffic is gradually becoming denser on the global highways, increasing the risk of collisions.

On a highway, there seems to be just three possible kinds of traffic: Free flow, synchronized flow and traffic jams. The situation around two hundred years ago, at the outset of the age of fossil fuels or the Anthropocene, was one of free flow. It was an age of open frontiers and unexplored wildernesses. Today, the situation is quite obviously rather one of synchronized flows occasionally segueing into a jam; there is so much traffic on the highway that you need to take a cautious glance in the side mirror before changing lanes – some notoriously overheated places (Israel/Palestine comes to mind, but also Syria and Ukraine) even seem caught in a gridlock. In this kind of world, there is an obvious need for traffic rules, witnessed in the rise of the environmentalist movement: While nature

was always culture's Other in agricultural and industrial societies, defined as the opposite of culture and often as its antagonist, it became, in the latter half of the last century, to be perceived as so weak and vulnerable that it needed the protection of culture to sustain itself: nature was no longer self-sufficient.

Speed creates heat; in physics, the two are synonymous. When, in everyday language, we speak of a person as suffering from a burnout, the metaphor is apt: He or she has done too many things too fast. But the metaphor of overheating is also used, unwittingly, in other domains. When the stock exchange crashes, Wall Street speaks of a 'meltdown' in the market, and when rates increase above what is seen as a viable level, they may talk about the need to 'cool down the market'. Riots and violent demonstrations are frequently associated with 'hotheaded' emotions. Moreover, climate change is associated with overheating in two ways: Temperatures are *de facto* rising, and the cause is accelerated change, particularly with respect to energy use.

Perhaps the unconscious use of the overheating metaphor can contribute to explaining why the story of global warming has recently become a central narrative about the present era. It follows the same intrinsic logic as several other widespread narratives, and confirms the view that history no longer means progress. Through its focus on heat as an unintended consequence of modernity, the stories about global warming function as a natural

science version of familiar stories about ethnic, religious and cultural frictions, urban population explosions and fast, but directionless technological change.

Several tensions of a generic type can be linked to overheating. In addition to previous, perhaps universal lines of conflict – power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, autonomy and dependence – new conflicts, frictions and tensions arise in this world. The most fundamental is arguably the double bind between ecological sustainability and economic growth. It may be neglected (as in Australia, where leading politicians are hostile towards any talk of climate change) or one may try to have it both ways, by depending on fossil fuels and simultaneously trying to be sustainable by planting trees, recycling waste and so on.

This world is interconnected, but it is neither seamless, homogeneous nor harmonious. Rights and obligations, opportunities and constraints are very unevenly distributed, and the global system itself is chronically unstable and self-contradictory. The most basic contradiction, familiar to anthropologists, is the chronic tension between the universalising forces of global modernity and that which is locally unique, demands to be autonomous and is by its essence ‘non-scalable’ (Tsing 2012). The tendencies towards standardization, simplification and universalization characteristic of a global neoliberal regime are almost universally met with a defence of local values, practices and types of relationship. Globalization highlights a typically modern contradiction between the system world and the life world, between the standardized and the unique.

### NEOLIBERALISM IN THE OVERHEATED WORLD

Unchecked climate change depends on the abdication of politicians from conscious, long-term societal planning, and this is why an understanding of the causes of man-made climate change has to incorporate an understanding of neoliberalism. The term neoliberalism is used to describe a particular kind of disembedded economic ideology and practice characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is commonly agreed that it began in earnest with the policies of deregulation and privatization instigated in

the United States and the United Kingdom around 1980, under Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher’s respective leaderships. The structural adjustment programs implemented by the IMF (International Monetary Fund) in the global south in the 1980s and 1990s conformed to the same principles, cutting down public expenditure and encouraging the development of competitive markets wherever possible. This set of policies, the Washington Consensus, was at the time the outcome of an agreement between the IMF, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury Department.

David Harvey defines neoliberalism as follows:

*Neoliberalism is . . . a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (2005: 2)*

Neoliberal policies have in the subsequent decades been pursued by governments in most parts of the world, fully or partly privatizing formerly public enterprises, such as railways and postal services, and encouraging, at least in theory, an unfettered market economy (although restrictions are usually placed on imports in the form of tariffs, and key industries are often heavily subsidized). The origin of neoliberalist thought is generally traced to Friedrich Hayek and his successors, notably Milton Friedman, whose finest moment may have been in the early 1980s with the implementation of this economic ideology in the US and the UK. However, there is an immediate precursor which should be interesting for anthropologists. Hayek’s teacher in Vienna, Ludwig von Mises, was an enthusiastic libertarian, an enemy of socialism in all its forms, and a believer in deregulation of markets. Mises’s most important critic was the economic historian Karl Polanyi, whose *The Great Transformation* almost immediately caught the attention of anthropologists upon its publication in 1944. This book in fact was the main source of inspiration for the subsequent ‘great

debate’ in economic anthropology between substantivists and formalists, a debate which continues till this day, in new guises, across the field of economic anthropology (Hann and Hart 2011).

*The Great Transformation* begins on a dramatic note as the author states, as a matter of fact, that ‘[n]ineteenth century civilization has collapsed’. What he has in mind is the ultimate outcome of nineteenth-century industrialization and colonialism, whereby the market principle became predominant and pervasive in Western societies. In what is virtually an *avant la lettre* criticism of neoliberalism, Polanyi argues that the values and practices of sociality, based on reciprocity and solidarity, are more fundamental to the human existence than the disembedding and ultimately dehumanising market principle. He predicts that they will prevail in the long term. A non-Marxist socialist, Polanyi argued against the commodification of labour and more generally the limited vision of mainstream economics. His main target was Mises, the father of neoliberalism. Polanyi was not opposed to the market principle as such, and was well aware of the existence of functioning markets in non-capitalist societies. What he objected to was its spread into social domains which should be governed by principles of sociality. Just as *Gemeinschaft* is ontologically prior to *Gesellschaft* in Tönnies’ analysis of the transition to urban, industrial society, a ‘human economy’ based on reciprocity and redistribution (Hart et al. 2010) is fundamental to social life, and people living in communities everywhere will therefore resist market dominance.

At similarly high level of abstraction and generality, the tension between economic growth and ecological sustainability is also a chronic contradiction, and it may be argued that it constitutes the most fundamental double-bind (Bateson et al. 1956) of contemporary civilization. Trade-offs between economic growth and sustainability are ubiquitous, but not always in such a way that the polluter pays. The global consensus concerning the causes of climate change is well known, yet politicians continue to prioritize growth, sometimes in ways that lead concerned citizens to suspect that we humans are about to undermine the conditions for our

own survival, with the complicity of our political and economic elites.

A further, important conceptual distinction is that sometimes described in terms of the formal and the informal, or the system-world and the life-world, the universal and the particular, or just the abstract and the tangible. (Structure and process, langue and parole are related dichotomies.) Since globalization entails standardization and homogenization (which does not have to mean 'Westernization', cf. 'Nipponization' in East Asia, the popularity of Hindi films in northern Nigeria etc.) – just as capitalism entails the integration of a variety of economic activities within a uniform system where everything is comparable with everything, or ethnicity amounts to making cultural differences comparable by developing a shared language for talking about difference – reactions stressing the virtues of autonomy, tradition, self-sufficiency or independence are inevitable. The right to define oneself, one's past, present and future, one's livelihood and relationship to other people and to nature, becomes a scarce resource and a series of political issues in an era of overheated

globalization. Although change may be welcomed, only the changes that do not challenge or upset established notions of personhood, sociality and continuity, are welcomed. The equilibrium between 'roots and boots', change and continuity, is always sought in locally specific ways. In a fundamental sense, the dialectics of globalization concerns the tension, not between 'the global and the local', but between the abstract and formal, and the tangible and informal, the universal and the specific, the disembedded and the embedded.

These contradictions evoke a world of unfulfilled promises.

#### THE NEED FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

But everything is not the same. Not only do places remain different, but people living in particular places need not share a common outlook or understanding of local conditions. People perceive, understand and act upon the changes in widely differing ways depending on their position in the locality (class, age, gender etc.) and on the characteristics of the locality as well as its position within regional, national and transnational systems. In order to

understand globalization, it is necessary to explore how its crises and contradictions are being dealt with in local contexts – how people resist imposed changes, negotiate their relationship to global and transnational forces, and which strategies for survival, autonomy and resistance are being developed. These explorations must take the genius loci of the locality seriously, situate the locality historically and connect it to an analysis of global processes. Finally, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of overheating effects, systematic comparison between otherwise very different localities is necessary. This is why an anthropology of 'small places and large issues' today must take on the fundamental challenges facing the planet, yet remaining – as always – sensitive to local life-worlds and aware of the fact that in spite of accelerated globalisation, places remain unique and must therefore be studied ethnographically. By doing this, anthropology can make a difference today, in a world faced by the mounting danger of global climate change, just as it successfully battled racism and cultural prejudice in the past.

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