



**Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Dasa Licen**

## On the anthropology of climate change

*A conversation with Thomas Hylland Eriksen*

Mainstream literature on globalization tends not to take the uniqueness of each locality seriously enough, says Thomas Hylland Eriksen. He explains how the anthropology of climate change is responding to the need for an analysis of the global situation seen from below.

**Dasa Licen:** You have a blog, a vlog where you report on your fieldwork, where you look a bit like Indiana Jones. On top of that, you write popular articles and essays. You seem to believe that media are very important for anthropology.

**Thomas Hylland Eriksen:** I think anthropologists should be more conscious about how they are perceived in the wider public. Unfortunately, for decades now, there has in many places been a certain withdrawal of anthropology from the public sphere. There are many burning issues, from climate change to identity politics to debates on human nature, where anthropologists are not present the way they could be. This was not always the case.

If you go back a few generations, there were many anthropologists who were also engaged public intellectuals. They were visible, well known, they wrote popular books, took part in political debates, and so on. Think of a scholar like Margaret Mead back in the 1960s: her research was controversial, but she succeeded in placing anthropology on the map by being engaged in important debates. Nowadays, there are important discussions where anthropologists would have a lot to offer, yet they are more or less absent.

An obvious example is identity politics, but you can also take the debates on human nature. In many western countries, these have been monopolized by evolutionary biologists or psychologists. The things anthropologists say about human nature are quite different, and while we are rather good at criticizing sociobiology and evolutionary perspectives amongst ourselves, we rarely go out and present our nuanced message to a wider public. It is a striking fact that the most famous anthropologist today is not an anthropologist. He is an ornithologist and physiologist called Jared Diamond who has written bestsellers about where we come from and where we are going. His latest book called *The World until Yesterday* is a sort of anthropological treatise about other cultures, traditional peoples, and about the kind of wisdom they contribute to the modern world. His book has not been very well received by anthropologists, because he gets a lot of things nearly right. Although he has not been trained as an anthropologist, he uses anthropological sources and asks the kind of questions we do. But he manages to do it in a way that makes people want to read his book. We should learn from these examples.

**DL:** We all know the case of the doctor who is walking down the street and sees an injured person: he must offer to help. Do you think something similar applies to anthropologists in the face of global crises?

**THE:** I do think so. In my own work, I try to address two big lumps of questions. One of them is the extent to which we can apply anthropology as a tool to understand the contemporary world. This is what my project "Overheating" is about. The second is a more general question: what is it to be human? There are two groups of answers, one of them says, well a human being is a small twig on a branch on the big tree of life: that's the story of evolution and while it generates some important some insight, it leaves aside a different set of questions about human subjectivity and emotions. I am talking about the complexities of life, all the existential struggles that human beings are confronted with. This perspective generates an entirely different set or answers, which are at the basis of what we do as anthropologists. By addressing them, we can contribute to a more nuanced view to what it is to be a human.

We are not only homo economics, merely maximizing creatures, and although instincts can be important for understanding our behaviour, we are not driven by them but immersed in a network of additional aspects. We are also not just social animals... Clifford Geertz insisted that human beings are primarily self-defining animals. Such a perspective enables not only a better understanding of the realities of human lives, but it also has its moral implications.

**DL:** Which ones?

**THE:** Let me give you an example. One of my PhD students works in rural Sierra Leone. It is an overheated place, in the sense that the Chinese and other foreign investors are coming in, opening up mines, new roads are being built... For many people this means opportunities, for many others it means misery. My student asks a guy, "so how do you explain these changes taking place in your community in the last years?", and this guy would just shrug and say, "well you know man, it's the global". We have to try to find out what exactly he means when he says "it's the global".

**DL:** Is this the aim of the Overheating project which you mentioned?

**THE:** What we are trying to do with Overheating is to fill a gap in the literature on globalization: we are trying to say something general about what I call the clash of scales, the dichotomy between the large and local. The large scale is the world of global capitalism, of the environment and of nation-states; on the other hand, there are the lives people live in their own communities. We are a group of researchers who've done fieldwork in lots of locations around the world and we try to produce ethnographic material that is comparable, so that we can use our material to create, if I can be a bit pretentious, an anthropological history of the early twenty-first century. So we are working very hard to create an analysis of the global situation seen from below.

**DL:** Your project seems so wide that it almost looks like the anthropology of everything...

**THE:** Not quite. It is the anthropology of *global crisis as perceived locally*. Say you live somewhere in Australia and all of a sudden a mining company

arrives next door and disrupts the ecosystem, and you ask yourself, "who can I blame and what can I do"? It's the kind of question that many people ask when confronted with changes on the large scale that affect their local community. Our informants do not distinguish between the environment, the economy, identity as they all interact and effect local life. What we are interested in is the anthropology of local responses to global changes.

**DL:** So, you are trying to advance an anthropological understanding of globalization?

**THE:** Yes. I think one of the shortcomings of the mainstream literature on globalization is that the uniqueness of each locality is not taken seriously enough: the local is present mostly in the form of anecdotes from people's lives. The problem of anthropological studies of globalization has often been the opposite: you go really deeply into one place and you neglect the wider perspective. We are trying to feel the gap in both approaches. The metaphor I often use is that of a social scientist who sits in a helicopter with a pair of binoculars and looks at the world. This would be the case of authors like Anthony Giddens or Manuel Castells. On the other hand, you have the person who works with a magnifying glass. We are trying to bring these two levels closer.

**DL:** The seriousness of global warming has been neglected by anthropologists, indeed by all social sciences for a long time.

**THE:** This is changing. The anthropology of climate change has become one of the big growth industries in academia, just as ethnicity and nationalism were big in the 1970s and 1980s. You are from Slovenia, you know the breakup of Yugoslavia, which came as a shock to us and we needed to understand what was happening. The genocide in Rwanda happened around the same time, Hindu nationalists came to power in India, contradicting everything we thought we knew about the country, controversies emerged around migration, multiculturalism, diversity, Islam in western Europe. After the turn of the century, the issue of climate change came to be understood as another layer on top of these issues.

**DL:** When did you develop your interest in climate change?

**THE:** It must have been many years ago but it took a while before I got the opportunity to look at these interconnected issues more closely. We are not geophysicists, we do not know much about CO<sub>2</sub>, we cannot predict the temperature of the world. What we can do is study how people respond, how they react, how they talk about it and what they do.



Summit camp on top of the Austfonna Ice Cap in Svalbard (Norwegian Arctic). Photo: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center / Thorben Dunse, University of Oslo. Source: [Flickr](#)

The dangerous thing about climate changes is that it has deep consequences, and yet it is hard to find anybody to blame. Think about it: say you are in small town or village in the Andes in Peru and you notice there is something odd with the water. It is not the way it used to be, you notice the glaciers are melting, and then you know that mining company has opened an operation venue nearby. You think the mining company must be to blame, because they probably pumped out all the water and they destabilized the local climate, and so you march up to them telling them "look, you are taking away our water, we need compensation", and they come out and they say "I'm sorry but it is not us, it is global climate change". Where do you go to address that question? Do you write to Obama, do you write a letter to the Chinese?

The concern with climate change can be very serious in the sense that it creates a sense of powerlessness. We just have to let things happen. For this reason I have been interested in how environmental engagement begins with things that are within your reach. I probably can't do anything about world climate, but maybe I can save some trees, or the dolphins in the harbour. That's how engagement begins.

**DL:** Do you feel such helplessness when you talk about global warming and they ask you, "so what is your solution"?

**THE:** Good question. I guess we all have to find the best way of acting where we are. It is not as if you or I have the responsibility to save to planet, or that you will fail if you have not been able to save it. I remember that as a schoolboy I had a devout Christian teacher who was raised by missionaries in Japan. Being a Christian missionary in Japan can be very difficult because the people are generally not very interested in evangelization. She told us about a fellow Christian who had spend his entire life as a missionary in Japan and succeeded in converting one person, which made his life feel worthwhile. He felt saving one soul was well worth 50 years of hard work. We should not be overambitious regarding what we are able to achieve. We can take part in public debates, add one drop of complexity, a drop of doubt. Maybe sometimes it is enough or rather, it is all we can do.

**DL:** As an anthropologist you are not allowed to pass judgment on people, however sometimes it is extremely hard to avoid judgment, for example when we are confronted with obtuse forms of climate change denial.

**THE:** Traditionally, anthropologists have not been too good at thinking of themselves as engaged subjects, we have been taught not to pass judgment, to just lay out the facts and say, well this is what the world looks like and this is why this makes sense to those people and not to those people, and I believe that this paradigm, this kind of relative paradigm has collapsed. Such an approach can no longer function precisely for the reasons I was suggesting: we are now all in the same boat. So there is no good reason anymore to make sharp distinctions between scholarship and the wider public, because we are facing the same radical challenges. We are all part of the same moral space and sometimes we have to take an ethical or political stance, anything else would be irresponsible. But we have to strike a balance between that kind of engagement and our credibility as researchers.

Back to your question: when I study people who deny the reality of climate change I have to take their view of world seriously. Many of them really believe in the paradigm or progress, industrialism and so on. This to me is a key double bind in contemporary civilization: there is no easy way out, between economic growth and the ecological sustainability. There is no reason that anybody should have the answer. When people ask me what to do, I have to say: "Sorry, I am trying to work this out together with you. I do not have the answer."

**DL:** You probably know Slavoj Žižek, he is more famous than Slovenia. He has had an ongoing dispute with Dipesh Chakrabarty on a related issue: should we first do something about global warming or engage in revolutionary struggle? Žižek believes climate change cannot be addressed outside the struggle for global emancipation, Chakrabarty on the other hand insists on the need to strike a historical compromise on a global level. What is your stance in this polemics?

**THE:** That is a very interesting question. On the one hand, I see the biggest tension in contemporary civilization is that between economic growth, which for two hundred years has been based on fossil fuels, and sustainability. Fossil fuels have been a blessing for humanity. They have created the foundations for modern life. Yet they are now becoming a damnation, a threat to civilization. This is hard to see from the viewpoint of a classical progressivist perspective.

This is strongly linked to another contradiction, the tension between a class based politics and green politics. What is more important, to do something about inequality or to save the world climate? Sometimes you just cannot pursue both aims. I worked in Australia, in a place where virtually everybody works directly or indirectly in industry. They have a huge power station, a cement factory, it is an industrial hub. Very few people have any environmental engagement to talk of. There is nothing about climate change in the local newspaper. It is all about industrial growth and job security. Being an environment activist in that place is very hard because your neighbours are not going to like it, but they have a very strong union-based socialist movement in that town. Those people see green politics as something that is a kind of a middle class thing. They associate it with cappuccino-sipping do-gooder students in Sydney and Melbourne, whereas us, the hard working industrial employees are the ones actually producing the cappuccino, the tablets, and they are not aware of where their wealth comes from. There is a widespread feeling of the hypocrisy of green politics.

Where do I stand? I think saving the climate is the main issue. But it should be pursued with concern for social justice. The first priority has to be to create sustainable jobs. If you take away a million jobs, you have to reproduce those jobs somewhere else. This leads me to what I think could have been an answer, had Žižek been aware of it, namely the anthropological school called human economy. There is a very creative English anthropologist who works in South Africa called Keith Hart who works from this perspective. David Graeber is sort of within the same world, looking at feasible economic alternatives to global neoliberalism. We are not talking about state socialism here: you are from Slovenia, you are too young to remember it, but state socialism did not make people too happy and it was not good for the environment either.

The point is that we need to talk about the economy in terms of human needs. The goal of economy is to satisfy human needs; not just material needs but also the need to something meaningful, to be useful for others, to see the results of

what you are doing. The point of economy is not only to generate profits, but to try to fight alienation.

**DL:** You wrote somewhere that the Left lacks an understanding of multiculturalism and knowledge of the environment, and it tends to neglect these two fields that are extremely important right now. Isn't that a surprising statement given that in the West, these issues have become almost synonymous with leftism?

**THE:** Things are indeed changing. That is probably one of the reasons Slavoj Žižek gets so angry sometimes, because he identifies with the Left, but the Left has abandoned his positions. I think many of us have the same feeling of being ideologically homeless. For 200 hundred years, the Left was quite good at promoting equality and social justice, presuming that economic growth will continue indefinitely. Then, in the 1980s multiculturalism emerged. The Left tried to appropriate it, tried to promote diversity, but it has not succeeded, because leftist movements have been good at promoting equality but not difference. Then environmental issues came as another factor complicating the picture. What do you do when you have to choose between class politics and green politics? You probably stick with class politics, but then you realize it is part of the problem, especially if you live in a rich country, as I do, where the working class flies to southern Europe all the time, going on holiday, driving cars, eating imported meat and so on. There is a big dilemma here. Again I must insist I don't have the final answer, but at least if we identify the problem we make small steps in the right direction.

By the way, I very strongly disagree with what Žižek says about multiculturalism. Whenever he makes jokes about it, he produces a caricature of multiculturalism, rather than a parody which is arguably his aim. He does not really know what he is talking about. He knows a lot of things, but multiculturalism is not one of his strong points.

**DL:** Žižek has advanced a positive interpretation of the Judeo-Christian tradition from a leftist perspective. Do you think that this tradition, which sees the Earth as ultimately doomed, poses a problem for environmentalism?

**THE:** Good question. Probably there is something about the way in which many people talk about climate change that resembles these Judeo-Christian ideas about the end of time. We are approaching the end, we are approaching the final phase. Think about the popularity of post-apocalyptic films in science fiction. It started already in the early 1980s with Mad Max films, and there has been a series of Hollywood and other movies about the world after the apocalypse. There is a real thirst for this sort of narratives. In the text I am writing now I just quoted T. S. Eliot who writes famously that the world ends not with a bomb but with a whimper. There is no before and after. Many of the communist revolutionaries held similar chiliastic ideas: things are going to get worse and worse and worse, and then after the revolution everything is going to be fine. But we have some 200 years of experience with revolutions, and we know they tend to reproduce many of the problems they were meant to solve, and on top of that they create new ones. Take the Arab spring in North Africa and the Middle East. I think it is very dangerous to behave as if the history has a direction.

**DL:** This is somewhat connected to the wider issue of the role of human civilization in the environmental history of the planet. You use the term Anthropocene, yet some find it inappropriate as it puts humans in the centre,

not only as the source of the trouble we are facing but also as more important than anything else on the planet. How do you feel about that?

**THE:** Some scientists want to have it both ways. Some think in terms of the changes that characterize the Anthropocene and at the same time they emphasize that humans and non-humans are really in a symbiotic relationship. I do not have a lot of patience for that kind of argument, especially if you think of the state of the world in times of climate change, with huge extractive industries, the global mining boom as the result of the growing Chinese and Indian economies, the upsurge of fracking which seems to have provided us with an almost indefinite supply of fossil fuels. I feel it is irresponsible to question the responsibility of humanity. And yet, however much I may love my cat and acknowledge that humans and domestic animals have coevolved, we must realize that human beings are special. There is no chimpanzee or the smartest of dolphins able to say, "well my dad was poor but at least he was honest". Only human beings can create that sentence: our sense of moral responsibility is unique and we must live up to it.

**DL:** Speaking of moral responsibility: I understand you had an important role in the coming to terms with the Breivik tragedy...

**THE:** Yes, I spent about three weeks after the terrorist attack and doing little other than talking to foreign journalist and writing articles for foreign newspapers. They contacted me not only because I have been writing about identity politics and nationalism, but also because Breivik had a sort of soft spot for me. He sees me as a symbol of everything that has gone wrong in Norway, a sort of spineless effeminate cosmopolitan middle class multiculturalist Muslim lover. There has been a hardening; polarization is much more strong now than it was only 20 years.

In the 1990s, people who had said things like I do about cultural diversity would perhaps have been accused of being naive, whereas in the last few years we are increasingly being accused of being traitors — which is different. Breivik quoted me about 15 times in his manifesto and his YouTube film. You might say he had a mild obsession with me. Eventually, I was called in as a witness in the trial by the defence. Originally, the psychiatrists who examined Breivik concluded he was insane. He should have received psychiatric treatment, and thus could not be punished for what he did. Of course, at the certain level one has to be insane to kill so many innocent young people. But his ideas are not the result of mental illness, they are quite widely shared. We have websites in Norway, with 20,000 unique visits every week, that were among his favourite websites. The defence wanted to call me in as a witness to testify that although he may be a murderer, his ideas are very common, they are shared by thousands of others. Which is true, but in the end I did not have to go because they had a long list of witnesses and they only used some of them.

**DL:** Were you scared by this kind of exposure?

**THE:** Not really. But in the first few weeks after the terrorist attack when everybody in Norway was in a state of shock, I noticed that some people at the university whom I hardly knew would come over to me and were behaving unusually nicely. I realized they probably thought that was the last time they see of me because I was probably next on the dead list. Then things went back to normal. You can never feel entirely safe. Breivik reminds us that even a handful of people can do immense harm, just like the terrorist attack in United

States in 2001. It has probably made society a little bit less trusting, a bit more worried. But I do not think about my own person security. About the security of my family, yes, but not mine. You cannot. That would be allowing the other people to win.

**DL:** Would you say that Norway has learnt anything from this tragedy?

**THE:** Unfortunately not. There was a chance that we could have, and many of us were hoping that an attack like that should make us understand that the idea of ethnic purity is absurd, crazy and not feasible in this century. We hoped that we could now get together to sit down and discuss these issues in a more measured, serious, balanced way, but it did not happen. It took only a couple of weeks for the usual political polarization to return. If anything, people who were against immigration became even more aggressive than before. We missed an opportunity there.

**DL:** You are coming to Ljubljana to a convention with the provocative title, [Why the world needs anthropologists](#). But isn't it a bit pretentious to suggest that the world needs us at all?

**THE:** That is an excellent question. I do not know whether the world needs novelists, but it probably does not need poets. It can easily manage without them. And yet, the human need for meaning is just as powerful as the need for food and shelter. The kind of meaning sensitive and intelligent people can provide is especially important, when we need to reformulate the main questions.

I sometimes think about students of mine who are never going to work as anthropologist, they will find jobs elsewhere, but studying anthropology enables them to lead a better life because they understand more of themselves and of the world. I even think that doing anthropology makes you a better person: just like reading novels, it enables you to identify with others. When you then see the refugees in the Mediterranean, at least you know, it could have been me. You think that because you relate to people in all parts of the world. I think the main sort of moral message of anthropology perhaps is that all human lives have value, no matter how alien no matter how strange it might appear. So yes, I think world needs anthropologists, just as it needs novelists and poets.

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