

# Cooling down the overheated Anthropocene

Lessons from anthropology  
and cultural history

*2018 Gutorm Gjessing lecture,  
Museum of Cultural History,  
University of Oslo*

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## Working Papers

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# Cooling down the overheated Anthropocene

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### **Abstract**

*The world is overheated, global civilization has painted itself into a corner and negotiates an uncomfortable double-bind between growth imperatives and an urgent need for sustainable solutions.*

*Gutorm Gjessing would have applauded this statement. If anything, he was an engaged scholar. Among his very wide-ranging writings, he produced some scathing and prescient criticisms of the world society he saw emerging in the postwar decades: it was increasingly unequal, it obliterated alternative recipes for living, and it destroyed the environment. He was ahead of his time in identifying the crises of the economy, identity and the environment in a globalising world.*

*It is widely agreed today that these challenges urgently need to be taken seriously in research, political mobilisation and policy making. With a focus on the crisis of climate and the environment, the question asked in this lecture is simply in what ways the kind of knowledge produced in anthropology and cultural history can contribute to the kind of enlightenment which is needed. Should we learn from past mistakes and successes, seek the necessary insights from the few remaining small-scale societies, or instead insist that modernity has to solve its contradictions through its own means, whether that means some kind of global government or technological solutions?*

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Never before has humanity placed its stamp on the planet in ways even remotely comparable to the situation in the late-modern period. Human domination of Earth is such that the term *Anthropocene* has become widespread as a label for the present time; a nomenclature which would, if widely adopted, make the Holocene (which began just after the last Ice Age, about 11,500 years ago) a brief interlude in the long history of the planet. We live in an era which, since the onset of the industrial revolution in Europe, is marked by human activity and expansion in unprecedented ways. And things are changing faster and faster. With no direction, it may seem. This situation, I shall argue, represents a major challenge for all of us, whether we identify with kin groups, nations, religions or humanity; whether we are academics, carpenters or peasants. Taking my cue from Gutorm Gjessing's bid for social engagement among anthropologists, I will use this opportunity to explore how anthropology can contribute knowledge enabling us not only to come to terms with, but also to transcend the contradictions and mounting problems generated through humanity's currently frantic transformation of the planet.

But first, it seems appropriate to provide some relevant context about the man whose name this lecture series carries. If anything, Gutorm Gjessing, who died in 1979, was an engaged scholar determined to make a difference in the world by using knowledge as a tool. One of the founders of the Socialist People's Party (SF) in 1961, he made no attempt to conceal his political views for the sake of scientific objectivity. Trained as an archaeologist and the author of important studies of Norwegian and Sami prehistory, he would later reinvent himself as an anthropologist, convinced that the kind of knowledge anthropology represented, mainly about so-called traditional societies, had the potential to change the world for the better. This would entail, he argued, a clearer political stance and a stronger commitment to global issues of development, poverty and inequality among anthropologists.

It was during his stay as a Rockefeller fellow in the USA in 1947–48 that Gjessing was politically radicalised. Ironically, his year in the US, courtesy of a major American foundation funded by the richest family in the country – today we would have pointed out, frowning, that its economic backbone was oil money – led him to a profoundly critical attitude towards American foreign policy and corporate power, not least in that part of the world now known as the Global South. In a book published towards the end of his life, Gjessing wrote, retrospectively:

It has become more and more clear to me that ethnography (anthropology) cannot remain indifferent towards the developments in the 'rich countries', with the growth of multinational mega-corporations and the powerful efforts on the part of these corporations, big industry and financial capital to retain and strengthen Western economic political privileges in the 'developing countries' which have always been our most important research areas. If the discipline continues to neglect these phenomena, it is no longer in tune with reality. (Gjessing 1977: 8, my translation)<sup>1</sup>

It is not self-evident that Gjessing's assessment of the apolitical character of anthropology was entirely accurate. He was writing this not at the time of McCarthyism, but in the differently politicised atmosphere of the 1970s, which saw the emergence of feminist, Marxist, ecosocialist, tiermondiste and even anarchist perspectives in mainstream anthropology. Respected anthropologists such as Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf had already studied the world system for some time from a critical, Marxist-influenced perspective, and postcolonialism was bobbing just below the surface when Gjessing's book was published in 1977.

Gjessing's challenge nevertheless speaks directly to us in the present age, when communities worldwide are being overrun by large-scale developments and an accelerated globalisation which is far more encompassing than it was forty years ago. Should we attempt to make our knowledge relevant and useful in a bid to make the world a slightly better place, or should we leave the messiness of political engagement to others? And, one might want to add, how could this be done without compromising the scientific credibility of anthropological research?

There is no reason why every practitioner of a trade should perform identical work. In order to make sense of the contemporary world, many kinds of knowledge are needed, from a variety of disciplines, intellectual traditions and subject-positions. Not all of them are immediately applicable to tackling global challenges, and this is how it has to be. As Fredrik Barth once quipped – as most of you know, he was Gjessing's

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<sup>1</sup> Det er blitt klarere og klarere for meg at etnografien (antropologien) ikke kan stå likegyldig overfor utviklingen i de «rike landene», med fremveksten av multinasjonale gigantkonsern og den intense offensiven disse konsernene, storindustrien og finanskapitalen har satt inn for å bevare og styrke de økonomiske og dermed Vestens politiske privilegier i de «U-landene» som jo alltid har vært vårt viktigste arbeidsfelt. Fortsetter faget å se bort fra disse fenomenene, er det ikke i pakt med virkeligheten.

successor as the Chair of this museum, or at least the upper floors – the main difference between basic and applied research is that basic research is so much more applicable.

In this intervention, I nevertheless take on Gjessing's challenge. Humanity and the planet are faced with challenges which are even more comprehensive than Gjessing envisioned, the most dramatic being climate change, but uncontrolled and unpredictable, and sometimes irreversible accelerated change takes place in a great number of other domains as well. In order to understand the human and non-human condition under these circumstances, being engaged is not sufficient – and here I take another cue from Gjessing – but so is a broad and interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. Now that the term Anthropocene has been established in many quarters as a general description of our time, we have a unique opportunity to bridge gaps in the academy, since the concept speaks to geologists as much as cultural historians, to geographers as much as biologists. The term is also inherently engaged in that it signals destabilisation, hubris and risk; the mere mention of the word Anthropocene, which is far less common in corporate boardrooms and at business schools than in the NGO world and the humanities, condenses the contradictions of industrialism and pollution, population growth and resource shortages, and of course large-scale environmental destruction and, ultimately, irreversible climate change. The time we are living in is one of transition, but there is no agreement as to what we might be transitioning into.

Let me start with a description.

In the last few decades, the belief in progress has been weakened. Modernity and enlightenment did not, in the end, eradicate hateful ideologies, sectarian violence and fanaticism, but sometimes seemed to encourage them. Wars continued to break out. Inequality and poverty did not go away, but were made more visible in the era of global neoliberalism. Recurrent economic crises forced economists to concede, reluctantly, that theirs was not a precise science after all. Although many countries were democratic in name, a growing number of people felt that important changes were taking place in their lives and immediate surroundings without their having been consulted beforehand. Significantly, the forces of progress turned out to be a double-edged sword. What seemed to have been the salvation of humanity for two hundred years, namely inexpensive and accessible energy based on fossil fuels, was about to become our damnation through environmental destruction and climate change. At the same time,

accelerated change took off in lots of other areas, from waste production to migration. It was as if modernity, always committed to change, had shifted to a higher gear and increased the pace of change. We are now driving on a highway with no speed limit. This is the kind of change that I speak of as *overheating*. In physics, speed and heat are two sides of the same coin. As a metaphor, overheating thus refers to the kind of speed that will eventually lead a car engine to grind to a halt, spewing out black smoke in copious quantities, unless the style of driving changes.

Overheating can also be illustrated by rubbing your hands together, something we often do on cold days up here in Norway. They warm up, but create friction as they do so. Now, if you could rub your hands together really, really fast, they would eventually burn up. But you can't do that. We have an inbuilt thermostat which tells us when to stop. The problem with overheating is that there is no thermostat. There is no direction, no ultimate goal for the frantic changes we see all around us (Eriksen 2016).

Perhaps the world is simply too full? A little less than ten years ago, on 28 November 2008, the great French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss marked his hundredth birthday. He had been one of the most important anthropological theorists of the twentieth century, and although he had ceased publishing years ago, his mind had not given in. But his time was nearly over, and he knew it. The book many consider his most important (on kinship) had been published almost sixty years earlier.

On his birthday, Lévi-Strauss received a visit from President Nicolas Sarkozy, France being a country where politicians can still increase their symbolic capital by socialising with intellectuals. During the brief visit by the president, the ageing anthropologist remarked that he scarcely considered himself among the living any more. By saying so, he did not merely refer to his advanced age and weakened capacities, but also to the fact that the world to which he had devoted his life's work was by now all but gone. The small, stateless peoples featured in his life's work had by now been incorporated, with or against their will, into states, markets and monetary systems of production and exchange.

During his brief conversation with the president, Lévi-Strauss also remarked that the world was too full: *Le monde est trop plein*. By this, he clearly referred to the fact that the world was filled by people, their projects and the material products of their activities. The world was *overheated*. There were by now seven billion of us, compared

to two billion at the time of the French anthropologist's birth, and quite a few of them seemed to be busy shopping, posting updates on Instagram, migrating, working in mines and factories, learning the ropes of political mobilisation or acquiring the rudiments of English.

So overheating is about globalisation. It is, to be precise, about the kind of runaway globalisation that we have experienced full-on since the early 1990s. Change, growth, development have been with us since the 19th century, as positive ideals and as societal projects. But there is something new and frightening about the contemporary speed, scope and scale of change today. As I said, there is no thermostat, no governor, no instance which can say that enough is enough and 'let's slow down a bit unless we end up destroying the very conditions for our survival'.

As a date for the transition from modernity to postmodernity, I propose 1991, which was a momentous year in the history of the contemporary. First, 1991 was the year in which the Cold War ended in its original form. The two-bloc system that had defined the postwar period was gone. The ideological conflict between capitalism and socialism finally seemed to have been replaced by the triumphant sound of one hand clapping. In the same year, the Indian economy was massively deregulated by Rajiv Gandhi's government. By 1991, it was also clear that apartheid was about to be relegated to the dustbin of history. Mandela had been released from prison the year before, and negotiations between the Nationalist Party and the ANC had begun in earnest. The future of the entire world (notwithstanding a few stubborn outliers like Cuba and North Korea) seemed to consist in a version of global neoliberalism, that is a virulent and aggressive form of deregulating capitalism where the main role of the state consisted in ensuring the functioning of so-called free markets. However, it soon became clear that neoliberalism did not deliver the goods. Social inequalities continued to exist, and in some countries, like the USA, they grew enormously. Countries in the Global South did not develop along the predicted lines, that is roughly in the same way as the countries of the Global North. Commentators as diverse as the economist Joseph Stiglitz (2002), the investor George Soros (2002) and the social philosopher John Gray (1998), former supporters of the neoliberal paradigm, wrote scathing critiques of the deregulated global economy. At the same time, politicised religion and other forms of identity politics flourished from India to Israel, from Belfast to Brunei, contrary to 20<sup>th</sup>



century predictions that education and modernity would weaken such forms of political identity, which were often divisive and regressive in character. The war in Yugoslavia and the Rwandan genocide, both unfolding in the mid-1990s, were reminders that an identity based on notions of kinship and descent did not belong to the past, but remained crucial for millions, and could erupt in horrible ways at any time. 1991 was also at the height of the Salman Rushdie affair. Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* had been published in 1988, denounced as blasphemous by powerful Muslim clerics, and the author had been sentenced to death *in absentia* by Iranian clergy. The affair was a tangible reminder of a new kind of interconnectedness, where local or domestic acts can have instant global ramifications. A couple of years later, the European Union was formally established, as a successor to the European Economic Community. The ambitious goals of the EU led to the destabilisation of borders through the instigation of complex political and economic arrangements with important consequences for its satellite states as well. As a result, the borders of and in Europe became more permeable, negotiable and fuzzy than before.

Around the same time, mobile telephones and Internet began to spread epidemically in the global middle classes, eventually trickling down to the poor as well. A certain kind of flexibility grew: You could soon work anywhere and any time, but these technologies contributed to fragmentation as well; what flexibility was gained with respect to space seemed to be lost regarding time. Life began to stand still at a frightful speed. Your gaze was now fixed at a point roughly one minute ahead. This spelled bad news for the slow, cumulative temporality of growth and development.

A similar kind of flexibility began to affect labour and business, and it was not the kind of flexibility that offers alternative paths for action, but one which created insecurity and uncertainty. Companies that used to distinguish between short-term and long-term planning ceased to do so, since everything now seemed to be short term; nobody knew what the world might look like in five or ten years' time. To workers, the most perceptible change is basic insecurity. One of the most widely used new concepts in the post-millennial social sciences (along with the Anthropocene and neoliberalism) is *the precariat* (Standing 2011), and there are good reasons for its sudden popularity. The precariat consists of the millions of employees whose jobs are short-term and temporary, and who, accordingly, have no clue as to whether they will have work next year or even next month. This new class is as easily found in the British construction

sector and in Danish universities as in a Mexican sweatshop or a shipyard in the Philippines. None of them have their jobs for life; they have to be open, flexible and versatile.

So the first fact about the contemporary world – the post-1991 world – is accelerated growth. There are more of us, we engage in more activities, many of them machine-assisted, and depend on each other in more ways than ever before. There are more of us than at any earlier time, and each of us has, on an average, more links with the outside world than our parents or grandparents. We have long been accustomed to the steep curves depicting world population growth, but the fastest growth does not take place in the realm of population. It goes without saying that the number of people with access to the Internet has grown at lightning speed since 1990, since hardly anyone was online at that time. But the growth in Internet use continues to accelerate. Only in 2006, it was estimated that less than two per cent had access to the Internet in Sub-Saharan Africa (bar South Africa, which has a different history). By 2018, the percentage is estimated to approach 30 per cent, largely owing to affordable smartphones rather than a mushrooming of internet cafes or the spread of laptops among Africans. Or we could look at migration. Around 1990, there were about 200,000 immigrants (including first-generation descendants) in my native Norway. By 2018, the figure exceeds 850,000. Or we could look at urbanisation in the Global South. Cities like Nouakchott in Mauritania and Mogadishu in Somalia have grown, since the early 1980s, from a couple of hundred thousand to a couple of million each (Eriksen 2014). The growth has been a thousand per cent in one generation.

Or we could take tourism. As early as the 1970s, cultured North European spoke condescendingly of those parts of the Spanish coast that they deemed to have been 'spoiled' by mass tourism. In 1979, shortly after the end of Fascism in the country, Spain received about 15 million tourists a year. In 2017, the number was about 60 million. We are, in other words, talking about a fourfold growth in less than forty years.

The growth in international trade has been no less spectacular than that in tourism or urbanisation. The container ship with its associated cranes, railways, standardised metal containers and reconstructed ports, perhaps the symbol *par excellence* of an integrated, standardised, connected world (Levinson 2006), slowly but surely gained importance from its invention in the 1950s until it had become the

industry standard a few decades later. The ports of Shanghai and Singapore more than doubled their turnover of goods only between 2003 and 2014. While world GDP is estimated to have grown by 250 per cent since 1980, world trade grew with 600 per cent in the same period, a development made possible not least through the reduced transport costs enabled by the shipping container.

Websites, international organisations, conferences and workshops, mobile phones and TV sets, private cars and text messages, air traffic and container ships: The growth curves point steeply upwards in all these – and many other – areas. In 2005, Facebook did not yet exist; a decade later, the platform had more than a billion users.

World trade has increased manifold since 1990, but even more spectacular is the growth in the number of photos taken in the world. Only in five years, from 2010 to 2015, the number trebled, from 0.35 trillion to a trillion photos. The explanation is simple; 80% of all photos are now taken with mobile phones – but we still need to understand what this development does to our perception of images, when they are free, everywhere and ephemeral. The amount of plastic in the oceans is growing exponentially; the current water shortage in Cape Town is likely to be a mere prelude to the water conflicts to come; and the few super-rich who control most of the global economy at a macro level are becoming richer by the day.

Not all change accelerates, and not everything that changes has similarly momentous consequences. Although the growth in tourism has been staggering, it has been slower than the growth in text messages. But although phenomena like texting and Instagram, tourism and internet TV have transformed contemporary lives in ways we only understand in patchy and partial ways, there are two changes of a material nature which are especially relevant for an understanding of the contemporary world, and which have undisputable consequences for the future: Population growth and the growth in energy use.

The growing human population of seven billion travels, produces, consumes, innovates, communicates, fights and reproduces in a multitude of ways, and we are increasingly aware of each other as we do so. 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, influencing but not erasing cultural differences, local identities and power disparities. Population growth is skewed and at its fastest in some of the poorest regions. According to the

demographer Massimo Livi Bacci (2017), the population of Nigeria, now double that of Germany, will be eight times that of Germany in 2050, with unknown, but doubtless noticeable consequences for wealth and poverty, migration and stability. Since we are now more than seven times as many as we were at the end of the Napoleonic wars, it comes as no surprise that we use more energy today; but the fact is that energy use in the world has grown much faster than the world population. In 1820, each human used on an average 20 Gigajoules a year. Two centuries later, we have reached 80, largely thanks to the technology that enabled large-scale use of fossil fuels. Consumption is far from evenly distributed, and so those of us who live in rich countries have access to so much machine power that it can be compared to having fifty slaves each.

The quadrupling in energy use is in reality a growth by a factor of 30, since there are more than seven times as many of us today as in 1814. The side-effects are well known. The visible and directly experienced ones are pollution and environmental degradation. Those effects which are both more difficult to observe and more consequential, are the long-term climate changes and the depletion of (nonrenewable) energy sources.

Writing on the cusp of the industrial revolution, Thomas Malthus famously predicted widespread famine and social unrest unless population was kept in check. His *Essay on the Principle of Population* from 1798 was still brand new when the fossil fuel revolution took off, proving him wrong by enabling an immense growth in productivity. But some of Malthus' insights may still turn out to be valuable, now that the side-effects of the fossil fuel revolution are becoming so visible. It may indeed be argued that if population had not begun to grow exponentially in the nineteenth century, humanity might have evaded the most serious side-effects of the fossil fuel revolution. Had there just been a billion of us, we could probably have done as we liked. The planet would have recovered. Similarly, it is possible to imagine, although the scenario is unrealistic, that world population increased sevenfold without the fossil fuel revolution. In that case, the climate crisis would have been avoided, but instead, the great majority of the world would have lived in a state of constant, abject poverty. Instead, we now live in a world where modernity has shifted to a higher gear, where there is full speed ahead in most areas. It has produced growth and prosperity, but it is also a volatile and ultimately self-destructive situation. Continued growth is theoretically impossible. This is a central conundrum of contemporary modernity making conventional ideas of

progress and development far more difficult to defend now than just a generation ago. The loss of a script for the future also affects temporalities, leading to a presentism whereby both future and past are dimmed and out of focus.

The contemporary world of climate change and the Anthropocene, and that of global transformation in general, has provided research grants, jobs and publishing contracts for many academics. Some even become famous, at least within their orbit. In sociology, Bauman and Beck wrote important works about unpredictability until they both passed away recently, while Hartmut Rosa has devoted his research to social acceleration. The man who proposed the term Anthropocene in the first place was the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who is also the co-author of a much cited article, with his colleague Will Steffen and the historian John McNeill (Steffen et al. 2007) on social aspects of climate change, while the archaeologist Joseph Tainter has produced important analyses of the causes of civilizational collapse in the past, a perspective popularised by the self-made geographer Jared Diamond, originally trained as a physiologist. Tainter's pathbreaking work, in particular, shows ways in which contemporary societies can learn from archaeological research when faced with mounting or looming crises (Tainter 1988, McIntosh, Tainter and McIntosh 2000, Tainter 2008). In his comments on the present, which draw heavily on the collapse of the Roman and Maya empires, climate change comes across as just one factor in accounting for the decline of complex societies. The decisive cause will consist in decreased marginal returns on investments in energy (EROI), owing to population growth and subsequent intensification of food production with decreasing returns, coupled with growth in bureaucratic, logistic and transport costs. Presently, resource shortages, a direct result of anthropoid dominance of the planet, may be a more acute problem than climate change. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, we have been able to exploit enormous amounts of energy; at first just in the shape of abundant surface-near coal deposits, subsequently through the harnessing of oil and gas for the betterment of humanity. The fossil fuel revolution enabled us to support a very high and fast growing global population with seemingly insatiable desires for consumption. Yet the cost of taking out fossil fuels grows as the low-hanging fruit has been used up. At the same time, production relying on fossil fuels is tantamount to destruction (Hornborg 2011), in a dual sense, since we are simultaneously eating up capital which it has taken the

planet millions of years to produce, and are undermining the conditions for our own civilization by altering the climate and ruining the environment on which we rely. Coal and its close relatives, the salvation of humanity for two centuries, is now becoming our damnation, and there is no easy way out. The lesson from cultural history may nevertheless be that lean societies, decentralised and flexible, with less bureaucracy than farming, fewer PR people than fishermen, are the most sustainable in the long term. As Tainter remarks: 'Complex societies ... are recent in human history. Collapse then is not a fall to some primordial chaos, but a return to the normal human condition of lower complexity' (Tainter 1988: 198).

Views from the humanities on the Anthropocene are also developing fast, and one book – admittedly not an academic publication – that etched itself into my memory was Roy Scranton's beautiful, but profoundly pessimistic *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (Scranton 2015) where the author, an American ex-soldier who had driven an armoured vehicle over the crushed remnants of Sumerian civilization as he entered the rubble that used to be Baghdad, urges us to learn to die gracefully, as a civilization, by listening to the distant voices of long deceased fellow humans speaking to us from the past. One could also mention historians like Sverker Sörlin, one of the early environmental historians and the author of a recent book-length essay on the Anthropocene (Sörlin 2017), or the important recent work of the environmental philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen (2015). Of course, I could have mentioned thousands of others, from law scholars to environmental psychologists and evolutionary biologists to geologists; this sprinkling of names and academic specialisations is merely meant to show that the interest in, and concern with, the global predicament covers many disciplines and cannot be covered in a single fell swoop or contained in a single seminar room. It is mushrooming, if you like, in a rhizomatic way.

What, then, could be the indispensable contribution of anthropology to this lively and sprawling knowledge production on the Anthropocene and in particular on climate change?

For one thing, this anthropology has to be historically aware, interdisciplinary and explicit in connecting scales and levels of causality. The community-centred anthropology emerging at the beginning of the last century, through Malinowskian functionalism, Radcliffe-Brownian structural-functionalism and Boasian historical

particularism, was always a mixed blessing. It shone in its meticulous attention to detail and local specificities, but tended to ignore historical processes and large-scale contexts. Yet, the anthropology of transnational connections and global processes is not new. Even if it has periodically been marginalized, the anthropology of connections and of world historical processes existed throughout the 20th century alongside the mainstream focus on small-scale societies and sociocultural integration. As a matter of fact, Malinowski himself, trained in diffusionist theory at the LSE, went out of his way to place the Trobriand Islands in a broader, regional context (Malinowski 1984 [1922]).

For another, this anthropology has to be ethnographically grounded. One reason that Gjessing never became kosher in the anthropological establishment – notwithstanding his honorary membership of the RAI – was his lack of ethnographic fieldwork, which tended to make his readings of others' ethnographies superficial. It is through the treasure trove, or perhaps goldmine, consisting of thousands of detailed studies of local life that anthropologists can show that overheating and the effects of the Anthropocene not only affect different societies and places differently, but is also interpreted and acted upon in ways which are sometimes similar, but which also frequently differ in fundamental ways. Neither economic statistics, climatology nor quantitative social science can perform this task, and since humans live in social worlds which are culturally shaped in complex ways, understanding a life-world is time-intensive. Unless climate change mitigation is going to follow the same logic as corporations and centralised government, neglecting local priorities and overrunning communities with exogenous change by telling them what to do without listening first, this knowledge is essential in order to come to terms with the Anthropocene.

Now returning to the simple question asked at the beginning of this lecture, I have to ask not only how anthropology can help understanding the human world in all its diversity, but how anthropological knowledge might help us out of the dead end of industrial modernity, the double bind of contemporary global civilization.

One approach consists in mining traditional societies which have proven to be ecologically sustainable over the centuries or even millennia; the 'cold' societies in Lévi-Strauss (1962), exploring their worlds and learning from them. A recent contribution to this school of thought in anthropology is Joy Hendry's *Science and Sustainability* (Hendry 2014). Although some alternative communities in the affluent world emulate traditional societies and even aspects of their culture, it is unthinkable and plainly

impossible that the majority of the world's population should revert to the lo-tech life of small-scale societies. However, since anthropology can offer descriptions of thousands of sociocultural configurations, it shows that there exist many recipes for the good life, not just one. The comparative study of values, and indeed value, points in this direction. The good life, in many non-consumerist societies, is not a hedonistically satisfying one, but a virtuous life, as it is in Aristotle's social philosophy. In South America, the *buen vivir* movement, informed in part by anthropological thought and research (Escobar 2008), is an attempt to move beyond the emptiness, inequality and destructive tendencies of capitalism, emphasising instead older ideas of how to live. Fredrik Barth, in most other ways distant from Gjessing, once said that perhaps the most important existential insight from anthropology consisted in the realisation that everything might have been different, even here. Buried in this statement is a potential cultural critique that Barth never developed himself, but which others have taken on. In his 1948 book *Mennesket er ett* (Humanity is one), Gjessing meditates on potential lessons to be learnt from traditional societies, but without relinquishing the benefits of modernity. Drawing on a wide range of ethnographic examples, he concludes that Western civilization ought to transcend its arrogance and demonstrate its postulated superiority by 'understanding, evaluating and accept other cultural forms' (Gjessing 1948: 108). And, he adds, learning from them when appropriate.

Another family of insights that anthropology can offer concerns the primacy of the local. Most of the time, we humans don't live in countries, but in places. This is the case just as much for Chinese (pop. 1.3 billion) as for Seychellois (pop. 90,000). Methodological nationalism, where the country is seen as a natural unit, was never part of the anthropological toolbox. In practice, this would entail that policies usually have to be tailor-made, and if they are to be efficient and not just foment resistance and resentment, they have to take their point of departure in the resources people already possess.

Thirdly, anthropology is in a privileged position to address one of the chief sources of the democratic deficit experienced in many ways in many parts of the contemporary world, namely the growing scalar gap between decision-making and those who are decided upon. A main cause of the rise of populism, ethnonationalism and politicised religion, the powerlessness resulting from a feeling of not being taken seriously, but also not knowing who to blame and what to do, is a result of opaqueness, aloofness and



the impenetrability of increasingly distant powers.

Fourthly, anthropology continuously and tirelessly shows that one size does not fit all. What works in a small town in Queensland might not work in lower Manhattan; what works in the local communities of western Oslo might not work in Sogndal in the western part of the country. Each place is interwoven with every other place, but each place also remains distinctive and unique.

As you would have realised, the communities I have in mind here are not Indian peasant villages or family-based Amazonian societies, but those of the affluent world. If anthropology is going to make a difference in practice when it comes to confronting the double-bind of the global system and the effects of the Anthropocene, a main empirical priority has to consist in focusing on people living in those societies which created this situation in the first place. What are the values guiding urban Norwegian academics when they fly several times a year to give twenty-minute presentations at conferences, even if they are perfectly well aware of the carbon footprint associated with frequent flying? How can we explain that Britons throw away a third of the food they buy? How can the practices of Americans who associate driving with the inalienable right called freedom be shifted without violating their fundamental beliefs? And how can Australians be weaned off their dependency on air-conditioning in a way compatible with Australian ways of life? These are questions that anthropologists are capable of answering, combining the virtues of basic research with the urgency of applied research.

The question, beyond the necessary contributions of anthropological perspectives and knowledge, is what could be a feasible alternative in a world society which seems to have locked itself to a path which is bound to end with collapse. There is no simple answer to this. Indeed, there is not even general agreement about how to phrase the question. Healthy doses of intellectual and political imagination, bravery and collective determination will be necessary to move ahead, to a world which is cooler, slower and scaled down – in a word, the kind of world anthropologists used to study before acceleration set in everywhere. And we must keep in mind that there can be no return to a pre-modern world. The project at hand consists, rather, in creating a truly post-modern world, beyond mere linguistic deconstruction and theoretical playfulness, which retains the achievements of modernity while resolving its mounting

contradictions. Throughout this effort, the anthropological voices should be heard loudly and clearly as part of the polyphonic chorus of knowledges.

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