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Interview with Thomas Hylland Eriksen

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INTERVIEW WITH

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

ON THE EASA AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN EUROPE TODAY

BY ELŻBIETA DRAŹKIEWICZ—GRODZICKA

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E. Drązkiewicz: You recently became the President of EASA, what would be your plans for the upcoming presidency, how would you like to influence the Association?

T. H. Eriksen: I should like to contribute to making anthropology more visible and known in European societies. This would in turn strengthen recruitment to our discipline and might have other positive effects as well, such as strengthening its presence in schools and its influence on intellectual life.

ED: Your Presidency comes at the time of increased tensions within European Academia. Academics and students in places such as Netherlands, UK, Ireland or Poland are protesting against recent changes at Universities and within Higher Education systems. I wonder if these should be considered locally, or if there should be approached as some larger – European/global issue. Is that something that would concern EASA?

THE: There is clearly a European dimension to these protests. As the Young Scholars Forum at

the last EASA conference in Tallinn made clear, there are important similarities between the challenges facing people struggling to establish themselves in the discipline. The kind of knowledge we represent – not obviously of instrumental utility, slow and thorough – is under threat almost everywhere, and the EASA should find ways of supporting our members and other anthropologists who find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation.

ED: One issue which is especially emphasised in the current academic reforms is emphasis on the applicability of the research. The issue of applicability have been the one dividing anthropologists for decades. Given your public involvement in Norway, using your own experience, would you advocate for stronger engagement of anthropologists in public debates? Is there anything that EASA can do to promote such engagements?

THE: Yes, EASA can facilitate a greater public presence by encouraging popularisation, interdisciplinarity and various forms of public engagement. In my book *Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence* (Berg 2006), I ask why it is that anthropologists, in general, are not more visible from the public sphere, since we have so much to offer in so many areas, ranging

from cultural diversity and migration to globalisation, human nature and religious revitalisation, just to mention a few of the most obvious fields. It is almost as if others – evolutionary psychologists, political theorists, cultural studies scholars and so on – stole our clothes while we were out swimming, and it is time we took them back. Seriously, it says something about our ability to communicate our message in a crisp, engaging and intelligible way that the most famous anthropologist alive today is a physiologist and ornithologist. I am, of course, thinking of Jared Diamond. Interdisciplinary work encourages some of the same qualities as popularisation. It forces us to translate what we are doing to outsiders and show why it is that anthropology is in fact a fundamental intellectual discipline, indispensable in any endeavour to understand the world and the human condition.

What we should be wary of doing is succumbing to the temptation of advertising the instrumental usefulness of anthropology as an intrinsic quality. That would be tantamount to playing into the hands of those who try to turn universities into dignified sausage factories. But having said this, this is not a time to be complacent or puritan about the mission of anthropology. Young people who consider taking up anthropology may reasonably ask: What do I learn, and what can I do with it? We may have to come up with some new answers to these questions, especially the last one. It is not as if the meaning of life necessarily lies in a permanent academic position at a university. Anthropologists can do many different things, and we should get better at showing it.

ED: Could say more about your own experience? Your own public involvement in Norway: what were the pros and cons of it? How (if) did it impact your research and academic career,

THE: Yes. For many years, I have been very active – some might reasonably think a tad too active in certain periods – in the Norwegian and Scandinavian public spheres. There are definitely pros and cons to this. And it is not as if everybody should feel a pressure to go out and give talks to Rotary Clubs, discuss Islam with populists on TV or write popular books about identity or happiness. In my own case, it has largely been a matter of sharing anthropological perspectives in order to add a small drop of complexity, some thought-provoking stories, some new angles on current or timeless matters. Many of my books in Norwegian are not anthropology books – among other things, I've published two novels – but I couldn't have written them if I had not been an anthropologist. The professional strangeness of anthropology, the ability to see the familiar in the exotic and the exotic in the familiar, is a virtue in any public sphere, and should be cultivated. Having said this, there is a price to be paid. As Einstein reputedly said: 'Make it as simple as possible. But not simpler.' That is always a risk. Moreover, in the current labour market for academics, you have to make certain that you are doing all right academically before you go public. On the other hand, owing to the decline in student numbers that many European countries are experiencing, a greater visibility for the discipline cannot be bad. I have been lucky to have generous and supportive colleagues at my home department, who were happy to see social anthropology appearing in the newspapers and on TV.

When it comes to research, it is obvious that taking part in the public sphere affects the intensity and continuity of your research. Sometimes there are synergies, when you engage in public discussion about your own work, but it can be an either/or situation as well. Partly for this reason, I have not been very visible in the Scandinavian public spheres in the last few years.

ED: I think our readers would be very interested in reading about your experience connected to the Breivik's trial – in a way, even if involuntary you got involved in the very public and controversial issue exactly because of your research and the knowledge you have produced. I guess you have widely discussed this topic in Norway, but I think it would be interesting for our international readers to learn, through your experience about the power of the knowledge we create. The consequences it might have.

THE: Absolutely. A couple of years ago, it reached the point where I was accused, in an op-ed article in *Aftenposten*, the leading Norwegian newspaper, of being *de facto* responsible for the terrorist attack, since my 'deconstruction of majority culture' and implied defence of cultural diversity made so many Norwegians so angry that they – or, to be precise, Breivik – was eventually provoked to commit his atrocious act. I am still looking forward to her explanation of the rise of Nazism.

Breivik and others on the extreme right in Norway seem to have had a minor obsession with me, frequently quoting statements I had made as evidence that Muslim-loving, spineless multiculturalists had taken over the country. Before the terrorist attack, it was easy to take a relaxed stance; after all, everybody is entitled to their views and misunderstandings. Before the 22 July attack, I used to say that being misunderstood may be better than not being understood at all. I am no longer sure.

Controversies over cultural change, national identities, migration and diversity are no longer a party game. Real people were killed by real bullets because they believed in diversity. And then we had the Charlie Hebdo massacres. These tendencies – violent right-

wing extremism and violent Islamism – are two sides of the same coin. The current ideological landscape in Europe is far more polarised and overheated than it was in the 1990s. At that time, defenders of diversity might be called naïve; they are now often called traitors. This does not mean that you and I should not challenge conventional mindsets and tell stories people are not used to hearing, but we now do so within a changed ecology of ideas.

ED: Clearly, a public involvement, an engagement of an anthropologist with public debate is something which in important way shapes your work. I would also like to learn about your opinion on another matter which is stressed in the new academic regime, that is obsession with 'accountability', increased competition, efficiency, 'excellence'. At present, the emphasis is on producing outputs – publications in peer reviewed, highly ranked journals. These journals are usually based in the UK or US, their editorial boards are usually populated with scholars representing Anglo-Saxon, (Western?) anthropology.

I wonder how the pressure to publish in them will impact the way we produce and exchange our anthropological knowledge? Are we risking homogenisation of anthropological knowledge, through promotion of only specific types of narratives, theories, but also chosen schools and academic centres?

THE: Good question! Now, I would be the last person to question the quality of the best Anglo-Saxon journals, but your question is well taken and somehow addresses a set of questions which have been at the core of the EASA's mission since we started. It concerns the relationship between the overlapping, but inherently diverse anthropological traditions in different parts of Europe. We would be well

advised to shift the balance in favour of languages other than English and publishing outlets other than those represented by the established hierarchy of journals and publishers. The issue has a political dimension for sure but it also raises intellectual challenges to do with criteria for assessing the quality of scholarship- the by now total dominance of English-language publications and so on. Some decentralisation of symbolic power is needed.

ED: Link to that question is the one about access to these journals and capacity of various researchers, representing different countries to publish in them. These journals are predominantly publishing in English, while the training and teaching across most of the Europe is still done in national languages. What can be done to secure more inclusive character of these journals? Do you think this issue can actually be tackled at the EASA forum: given the local anchoring of most of these journals, would EASA's involvement in these matters be considered a transgression of its prerogatives?

THE: At a purely technical level, good language editing and access to (often meaning funding of) competent translators represent a kind of infrastructure that should be given higher priority; we are talking about the 'switchboards' enabling and facilitating the global conversation. At a deeper and more substantial level, you are partly hinting at different ways of doing anthropology and the possibility that this diversity might be reflected better on the European stage. Although other people's publishing policies are not strictly speaking any of EASA's business, we can and should have a position. After all, the association was originally founded to strengthen not only European anthropology, but also the network of European anthropologies. This entails, among many

other things, finding ways of challenging existing symbolic hegemonies.

ED: My follow up (on this and previous question) would be exactly about the decentralization of the symbolic power, but at the same time, the power of European Anthropology (or should I say ethnology?) to compete/collaborate with UK-American centres. In a way it seems paradoxical to me that while British journals (and consequently scholars who populate their editorial boards) hold quite a powerful position in academia, they seem not to be very visible or active at the European forum. I haven't done research on it but every time an EASA conference is taking place, it strikes me how important this event is for Eastern European, and some other 'continental' anthropologists, while at the same time very few senior scholars from leading UK institutions get involved in organizing panels, workshops, networks etc. It seems to me that before even Brexit started to be discussed in UK, British anthropologists have checked out from European involvement (except perhaps of EU funding 😊). For them the go-to place is AAA. How can we foster the dialogue between UK and the continent? Or is my diagnosis of the power division in European anthropology wrong all together?

THE: I'm not sure about the non-participation of British colleagues. There may be a tendency that some prioritise the ASA and, to a lesser extent, the AAA; but what has struck me over the years is the gradual disappearance of French colleagues from the EASA. I made a headcount after the Copenhagen EASA conference, where there were more Slovene than French anthropologists present. We should probably find a way of strengthening the original bilingual identity of EASA. But as to your larger question, all I can say is that we have to make a real effort to make sure that the EASA conference is the place to go in order

to present and discuss your work, make new friends and keep abreast with the theoretical and empirical development of the discipline.

ED: Following this train of thought I wonder about EASAs relation to AAA. As the President of the Association, how would you describe advantages of our European association and conference gathering over American ones? What about IUAES?

THE: We have a unique niche in that we were historically founded, following an initiative from Adam Kuper, as an arena for dialogue between different European anthropologies. At the outset, Central and East European anthropologists were only marginally included, but history caught up with us. The Iron Curtain fell before the first conference in Coimbra, and through the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the fledgling EASA executive committee managed to find funding to bring many East and Central European anthropologists to Coimbra. Ever since, it has been a meeting place of diverse anthropologies with overlapping, but discrete histories. This is not the case at AAA, which is not only far larger, but also in some ways more streamlined. I should also add that EASA meetings, owing to their smaller scale, have more of a family feeling to them than the AAA conferences; you bump into people in a way that doesn't happen at AAA. When it comes to IUAES, it is a different animal altogether; important in its way, but with its own mission.

ED: Going back to the discussion of current changes within the Academia, I would like to ask you about worsening situation of young scholars. Young academics are forced to take low paid, short term contracts, or hourly paid jobs. Mobility is promoted as one of the solutions to the problem. So the question here is what steps can EASA take to support young academics? But also: given your research

experience from studies on globalisation, as well as the first-hand experience of managing large anthropological department with researchers originating from different places what pros and cons do you see of the existing shifts in the employment modes at the universities?

What would be your ideal model of anthropological department?

THE: Another multidimensional issue. First of all, an anthropology department should be a place where you want to spend your working day. It should be a friendly, supportive and intellectually challenging environment where people feel that they're doing something important together with others. But that's not really your question. It is in the nature of academic research and career trajectories that many have temporary jobs as postdocs, researchers, lecturers and so on – and there aren't permanent positions for everybody at any given department. For this reason, a second important criterion should be that departments ought to have many ties, strong and weak, with possible workplaces such as applied research institutes and NGOs, and many ought to improve their skills in developing joint projects with non-anthropologists. Mobility can help at the individual level, but obviously it does not solve the structural problem that you're hinting at.

ED: What is your opinion (again from your own experience of person who has a power to hire people) on the internationalisation of academia? What are the advantages for departments (and in particular anthropology) of getting people from outside of your own institutions and internationalizing? And then the dilemma of remaining loyal to your own

PhDs who are hoping for such jobs, is one obliged to such loyalty, what are the benefits?

THE: I believe this is a recurrent dilemma in many European anthropology departments, perhaps especially in the smaller countries. In the US, the situation is different in that people have to move after their PhD. Somehow we find ourselves in the same predicament as the Melanesian big-man in Sahlins' classic article 'Poor man, rich man, big man, chief'. The big man must pay attention to his kin and co-villagers, but he also needs to reach out and conduct foreign policy by visiting other villages, bringing gifts and so on. If he exaggerates, his kinsfolk will eventually rebel. With us, it is always a question of finding the right balance. In smaller countries like Norway, language is bound to be an issue, and you need people everywhere who are familiar with the local academic culture, who can do a competent job in university politics and so on. But there is no reason that everybody should have the same skills. Parallel to what I said earlier about popularisation and going public with your work, a good department thrives on complementary skills. But having said all this: No, we do not have an obligation to our own PhDs who are hoping for jobs. If we hire them, it is because they are the best applicants, full stop. Anything else would be unhealthy. And yet, what it means to be the best applicant is open to discussion.

ED: What advice today would you give to young students who wish to peruse academic career?

THE: You really need to want it, you have to be passionate about the kind of knowledge that we produce, and relish, in academia. Otherwise, you're just going to be unhappy and frustrated. Yes, it may be wise to think

strategically about the choices you make as you go along, but if there is no existential nerve – nothing important at stake for you – the result will, at the end of the day, not be satisfactory.

ED: One returning argument when these issues are being discussed is a lack of money. I wonder how much truth there is in this narrative – especially if we include in our consideration the issue at the macro-European scale. On the one hand there are not enough resources to offer new permanent positions to researchers/lecturers, to promote current staff while the teaching load is expanding. Yet, at the same time, within the EU, and across Europe, via various consortia, generous research/networking funds are on offer. My sense is that we already witness a formation of a new cohort of scholars who specialise in securing these grants and effectively focus predominantly on research. I wonder how this new financial mode, and potentially resulting from it division of labour which separates researchers from lecturers will change our discipline and academia at large?

THE: This has been an issue for many years, and it is being exacerbated by the new forms of funding. And the question really relates closely to your first question, about EASA and the situation for anthropology in Europe. For if the most well-known scholars disappear from teaching, this will in turn affect recruitment to the discipline. Besides, in my own experience, teaching and research go hand in hand, and large grants, such as ERC funding, should be of benefit to the larger community. However, the real problem here is structural; there are more good anthropologists and excellent research proposals than there is money to fund them. As a result, an entire industry of application production has emerged and – as you know – most of these projects are never funded.

Someone should do a study of the amount of time and money which is spent writing applications, and evaluating other people's applications, relating it to the amount actually spent funding and doing research.

ED: Are there any other issues, changes within the European academia, which you think are crucial from the perspective of anthropology and relevant for EASA?

THE: In some areas, we are doing rather well as a discipline, for instance when it comes to ERC funding. But we fail to exert the influence we should have had in the wider world. Perhaps we talk too much to each other and not enough to everybody else. I believe more interdisciplinarity and more accessible ways of writing would help. When the general intellectual discourse on human nature is dominated by evolutionary psychologists, the controversies over migration and social exclusion by sociologists and the finer points of identity are forefronted by cultural studies, one cannot help feeling, as a proud anthropologist, that other people stole our clothes while we were out swimming. We should reclaim them.

ED: To add something more optimistic to this interview – what positive changes do you recently observe in our discipline and universities at large?

THE: Regarding universities as such, I'm not sure what the positive signs are, to be honest. The kind of knowledge we produce in the non-vocational, non-instrumental domains of learning represents a counterculture – but don't get me wrong; it is a counterculture that can be both illuminating, critical and sometimes subversive. As to anthropology as

such, seen as an intellectual project, it is easier to be optimistic. It is flourishing, both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the last few years have seen the re-emergence of intense controversies and disagreements, always a healthy sign, that we have been missing for many years now. I am thinking, in particular, about the vivid and occasionally heated debates about ANT and 'the ontological turn'.

ED: I wonder if EASA has any way of making its voice heard within the EU Research Agency, or individual state Higher Education Institutions- have there been any attempts of impacting the decision making process in that regard?

THE: Let me say that we are working on it. We are members of several lobbying organisations representing the interests of the social sciences at a European level; when it comes to individual countries, we are following developments and do our best, with our limited resources, to defend the kinds of knowledge that we have faith in.

ED: Finally would EASA see it relevant to undertake a taskforce or research into the conditions young European anthropologists find themselves working in?

THE: In fact, we do have such a taskforce already! Hana Cervinkova and Paolo Favero are responsible for it. Among other things, they organise the 'Young Scholars Forum' at the next EASA meeting with Italian colleagues, and are also looking into the job market for young anthropologists. Any suggestions as to what we could do, would be most welcome!