

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

In May last year, our academic staff met to decide on a candidate for an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Copenhagen. A few possibilities were mentioned, but as soon as Thomas Hylland's name was proposed, there was immediate and unanimous recognition that he was the clear choice. 'Yes, of course, Thomas. Obviously, Thomas'. Here is why.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen stands as a beacon in anthropology and beyond. He is an acute ethnographer of the local with a broad vision of the global. His deep concern with the urgent issues of our time is coupled with a tireless commitment to public engagement in the hope of making the world a little better. His work on ethnicity, nationalism, globalization, climate change and new communication technologies appears in scholarly publications as well as more popular media.

Born in 1962 in Oslo, Thomas has done fieldwork and lectured in many parts of the world but remains firmly placed in Norway and Scandinavia. He completed his cand.polit degree in 1987 and his PhD in 1991, both in Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. By 1997, at the tender age of 33, he was a professor in the same department. And he is still there.

Fieldwork is foundational and formative for the discipline of anthropology and often for the fieldworker, as well. Thomas began his life as an ethnographer with a year on the island of Mauritius, in the Indian ocean. followed by a year on Trinidad in the Caribbean. His commitment to comparison was in play early on. In both locations, he examined issues of ethnic identity, cultural commonality, and nationalism—themes that he continued to work with in Norway, as his own country became more heterogeneous in the 1990s. He led collaborative research projects on cultural complexity and forces of inclusion and exclusion in Oslo. In analysing this ethnography, he pursued distinctions between difference, diversity and complexity. While identity politics rests on categorical difference, often ethnic difference, diversity characterizes both majority and minority groups.

Throughout his career, Thomas has practiced and praised the ethnographic commitment to deep research in local worlds. In his talks on acceleration, he often points out, that while so much is speeding up, some things must be done slowly. It takes time to read Dostoyevsky, to raise children, and to do the participant observation that makes good fieldwork. Deep qualitative knowledge about other people's lives is only possible with perseverance and patience.

Thomas has always held to the necessity of placing such knowledge in historical perspectives and in a macro framework of global connections and developments. He writes of the contradictions between universalizing forces of global modernity and the distinctiveness of local societies. The task is to understand how global shifts and crises are played out locally, whether local is a suburb of Oslo or an oasis in the Sahara. The contrast in scale is captured in the title of his textbook: 'Small Places, Large Issues'.

That basic textbook has seen three editions in Norwegian and four in English, as well as numerous translations, most recently to Georgian and Arabic. Generations of Danish anthropology students,

like their peers in a host of other countries, have been introduced to the discipline by Thomas Hylland Eriksen. I checked with our colleague Peter Henriques, who has taught our introductory course for some years. He has a method of vetting possible textbooks by checking whether certain topics are covered. 'Small Places' continues to pass the Peter Henriques test. But Peter does not start the students with caste systems and Kula exchange. He assigns the later chapters first—the ones on complex contemporary societies and the paradoxes of globalization.

Thomas's pursuit of large issues continued through an advanced grant from the European Research Council for an ambitious collaborative project on 'Overheating'. The several prongs of this research addressed economic, environmental and identity aspects of accelerating globalization. As part of that project, Thomas undertook fieldwork in a mining community in the Australian state of Queensland, practicing the virtues of ethnography that he preaches.

Not only has Thomas pursued ethnographic research on a wide range of contemporary issues. He has also been an important force for the discipline of anthropology in Scandinavia and Europe. He has served as president of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. In publications, lectures, and interviews, he reflects on the intellectual history of the discipline and the inspiration he has found in different strands of Scandinavian, British, continental and American scholarship. Perhaps, he suggests, eclecticism comes more easily to academics working in a more peripheral place. Oslo rather than Paris or Berkeley. Although from our vantage point on Øster Farimagsgade, Oslo does not seem at all peripheral.

In times when doubt is cast on the continued relevance of our discipline, his message is passionate: Anthropology is more needed now than ever before because of the greater interconnectedness of peoples through migration and new communication technologies. And not least because of the global scale of contemporary problems. As we will hear more about directly.

Although Thomas sometimes counsels us to slow down, cool down and scale down, as a writer, he clearly does not follow that advice himself. He has 56 books to his name—maybe more by now; they are co- and singly authored and edited, both academic and popular. Together with articles and book chapters, his list of publications ran to 813 at last count, written in English and Norwegian and translated into thirty languages.

Thomas has never restricted himself to purely academic writing. The son of a journalist, he began writing for newspapers while still a teenager. He is a frequent contributor to print media in Norway and he has a weekly column about books, all kinds of books. Even novels. In fact, he himself has written two novels—an inspiration for those of us trying to make anthropology more literary.

Thomas is a regular guest on radio and television. Blogs and podcasts and You Tube opened new channels in recent years. He brings his scholarship to bear on current events and concerns: the Breivik murders, smartphones, and since March last year, the Corona pandemic. His sustained efforts to communicate research to wider publics have been awarded prizes for the dissemination of science. His energy, clarity, engagement, curiosity and all-round knowledgeable make him exemplary as a public intellectual. That position is not always comfortable. In a piece felicitously

titled 'Ethnography in all the right places' he wrote: 'over the years I have intervened so often in matters of minority rights and immigration that the terrorist Breivik quoted me more than a dozen times in his manifesto, as a symbol of everything that had gone wrong in Norway.' Making an impact can take many forms.

Thomas's interventions are wide-ranging, but they build on his formation as an anthropologist. Just as does the work of our many former students taking on occupations outside of academic anthropology.

The Department of Anthropology wishes to honour Thomas Hylland Eriksen for his contributions to our discipline, to us as colleagues and to our students. We appreciate his dedication to the fundamentals of anthropology as a social science, his concern with small places and large issues and his continuing efforts to show the relevance of anthropology beyond the academy. Tomorrow he will receive an Honorary Doctorate and we hope that it will signal an even closer relationship to our Department and our University.

Susan Whyte
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