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Is the world 'Overheating'?

Key Concepts: Globalization, Localization, Identity Politics, Anthropology.
Key Works: *Overheating* (2016), *What is Anthropology?* (2004)

The contemporary world is... too full? Too intense? Too fast? Too hot? Too unequal? Too neoliberal? Too strongly dominated by humans? (Eriksen, *Overheating*, Preface, vii)

Eriksen bases his insights on the study of **ANTHROPOLOGY**, which Eriksen defines as “**the comparative study of culture and society with a focus on local life.**” In other words, Anthropology helps us to make sense of the contemporary world by offering “**insights about human life and culture from below and from the inside**”. Specifically, anthropology offers us **TWO** kinds of insights:

1. Knowledge about **specific cultures and cultural variation** - “*things to think about*”, and
2. Methods & theoretical perspectives that enable practitioners to **explore, compare & understand** human cultures - “*things to think with*”

One component in the traditional world of Anthropology is the concept of **Cultural Relativism**, the view that “*every society, or every culture, has to be understood in its own terms, from within, and that it is neither possible nor particularly interesting to rank societies on an evolutionary ladder.*” However, Eriksen pushes back against this idea when he notes that, “*Cultural Relativism can no longer be an excuse for not engaging with victims of patriarchal violence in India, human rights lawyers in African prisons, minorities demanding not just cultural survival, but fair representation in their governments.*”

Eriksen's 'Conceptual Inventory' – The terminology you'll be expected to understand in context and utilize appropriately.

Double Bind: “A self-refuting (self-contradictory) kind of communication, as when you say two incompatible things at once. A person trying to act on the basis of a double bind will never be able to do it right, since no matter what they do, it can be objected to.” i.e. ‘sustainable growth’ – economic growth and environmental sustainability.

Runaway Processes: “forms of growth that were meaningful and purposive for a long time before reaching a point where the unintended side-effects were threatening to become more noticeable than the intentional or functional effects.”

Global Neoliberalism: “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.” Associated with Thatcher and Reagan. The market will solve all our problems!

Treadmill syndrome: “Since your competitors improve, or the environment changes, you have to improve and adapt merely to keep your place in the ecosystem, in a market, or in a ...hierarchy.” It is an “integral part of and an outcome of the Runaway Processes that create an overheated world.”

Flexibility: “Uncommitted potential for change” where the system as a whole “depends on keeping many of its variables in the middle of their tolerable limits”. Both ‘standardization’ and ‘specialization’ reduce flexibility.

Scale: “refers to the scope and compass of a phenomenon.” Can include: ‘social’- the reach of your network, ‘physical’ – the compass of an infrastructural system, ‘cognitive’- the size of your perceived world, ‘temporal’ – how far back & forward you look in time when making decisions.

Reproduction: (close to sustainability) “the ability of a person, a system or a social field to continue on its path without constantly having to adjust to exogenous (external) changes.”

Eriksen uses these *interconnected* ideas to argue that the world is “**OVERHEATING**” – the crises of **globalization**, which are increasing in speed and severity, aren't caused by an “*evil, selfish or short-sighted conspiracy*”, but rather are the result of a series of “**clashing scales**” which remain poorly understood. The ‘big picture’ view of global change too often ignores the highly local effects that globalization has brought about. Rather than embracing a global (even a ‘cosmopolitan’) identity, people revert to ‘**identity politics**’ to help them understand the world around them. “**Globalization creates the conditions for localization.**”

How does Anthropology help us to think about Globalization?

From a 'Leaving Cert' perhaps Eriksen most important insight about Globalization is that it is a **complex phenomenon**, that doesn't lend itself to easy categorization or study.

But, he offers 4 reasons why Anthropology can help...

1. **Contact between culturally different groups has increased enormously.** Long-distance travel is now common, safe, and relatively inexpensive. (In 'Overheating' he studies the impact of Cultural Tourism and forced migration to draw his conclusions).
2. The world is shrinking in other ways too – global, instantaneous, friction-free **Communications** are a prime example. The **Economy** is also becoming increasingly integrated. In **Politics**, global issues, like AIDS or International Terrorism, "increasingly dominate the agenda."
3. **Culture changes rapidly for us.** "The nuclear family is no longer the only common and socially acceptable way of life." As a way to demonstrate this, Eriksen ask us to consider who you have more in common with, somebody living in your country 50 years ago, or someone living thousands of miles away (say in California) now?
4. **There's an unprecedented rise in 'Cultural Identity'.** Many feel that their uniqueness is threatened by globalization and indirect colonialism.

Therefore, Eriksen argues, that "In order to understand this seemingly chaotic, confusing and complex historical period, there is a need for a perspective on humanity which does not take preconceived assumptions about human society for granted, which is sensitive to both similarities and differences, and which simultaneously approaches the human world from both a global and a local angle." Do you agree with this assessment?

Adapted from "What is Anthropology", (Eriksen, 2004)

What conditions does Eriksen say are responsible for the rise of "Identity Politics"?

Eriksen argues that for a number of reasons, **globalization creates the conditions for localization**. This trend can take numerous forms, such as a focus on nationalism or separatism, faith systems (religious revitalization), cultures (linguistic or cultural movements) or interest groups (ethnicity). This link between the global and local was given the catchy name of **GLOCALIZATION** by Sociologist Roland Robertson. Eriksen identified a number of factors that make the emergence of identity politics more likely.

1. **Competition over scarce resources**
2. **Modernisation and globalization actualize differences and trigger conflict.**
3. **Similarity overrules equality ideologically**
4. **Images of past suffering and injustice are invoked**
5. **Political symbolism and rhetoric evokes personal experiences**
6. **First-comers are contrasted with invaders**
7. **The actual social complexity in society is reduced to a set of simple contrasts**

If you want to write a successful essay that considers the challenges of globalization, you would be well advised to gather together examples of each of these factors with evidence that will demonstrate your personal engagement with the issue at hand. In his article "**Globalization and the Politics of Identity**" (<http://hyllanderiksen.net/UNChron.html>) (1999) Eriksen offers examples that you can use as a starting point, but to have full impact, you'll need to offer examples of your own!

Class debates: To what extent do you agree with Eriksen about the following Statements?

1. "Each place is interwoven with every other place, but they also remain distinctive and unique" (p.12)
2. "...from peasants to unionists, from indigenous groups to industrial workers, indicate that the complaints (against globalization) are universal and global, while the solutions are particular and local." (p.21)
3. "A society may be embedded in global networks of production and consumption without its residents being aware of their place in a global system. Conversely, residents of societies which are relatively isolated in terms of economic and political processes may be well connected through symbolic communication and possess a high awareness of their place in a wide, global system." (p.28)

Eriksen doesn't just get bogged down in criticism and analysis, he also offers potential **solutions!**

In his excellent TED talk (google search for "We Are Overheating | Thomas Hylland Eriksen | TEDx Trondheim"), he argues that to avoid the end of the world as we know it, the human race must repurpose a ship - one which has already set sail - at the global but also local level. In a nutshell, we must...

"Slow Down, Cool Down and Scale Down"

How could you take actions on a **personal** and **local** level that would heed Eriksen's advice?

Slow Down

Personal:

Local:

Cool Down

Personal:

Local:

Scale Down

Personal:

Local:

Eriksen on Human Rights: He reminds us that Globalization isn't simply a technological or economic phenomenon, but covers 'ideas' too. His example is that of HR, whose ideas and values had been limited to "*educated elites worldwide (and not just, as some wrongly believe, in the West), has now spread to villagers and farmers in remote areas*" thanks to globalization. He argues that the "*rapid dissemination of human rights ideas is probably one of the most spectacular successes of globalization.*" How can you use your knowledge of National and International HR institutions and agreements to demonstrate your grasp of Globalization?

Critics of Identity Politics: Many people criticise the very idea of 'Identity Politics'. Sam Harris, for example, is among those that argue that we shouldn't let it become a factor in how we argue. Listen to the summary of his idea on YouTube (**Sam Harris - The Religion of Identity Politics**) and see do you agree with his logic. Eriksen argues that whether you agree with it or not, it's here to stay when he says that "*Ethnic nationalism, minority movements and politicized religion offer a larger share of the cake as well as a positive sense of self, and like it or not, these movements will remain influential in most parts of the world until something better comes along*".

Thinker's Background

- Eriksen is a Norwegian Anthropologist born in 1962.
- He was appointed as a full Professor of Anthropology at the early age of 33!
- Much of Eriksen's career has been devoted to popularizing "social anthropology" and conveying basic ideas around cultural relativism as well as criticism of Norwegian nationalism in the Norwegian public debate.
- He was famously called as a witness in the case against Anders Behring Breivik, the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway attacks that killed 77 people. Eriksen commented that he didn't think Breivik could differentiate between his online life in computer games and the real world. Is this becoming an increasing problem? Why might an anthropologist's insights be relevant here?
- He has served as President of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) and a member of the Norwegian Academy of Science.
- He was a minor political candidate for the Norwegian Green Party in 2011 and 2013.
- His interdisciplinary field research has ranged from Trinidad to Australia to Norway and the Seychelles. It has focused on several ethnically and culturally complex societies. His work has tackled themes such as ethnicity and the dynamics of culture and identity, cosmopolitanism, human rights, globalisation and its implications for the study of culture and society.

One beautiful word! If you only learned one word from Eriksen let it be **Solastalgia**, which is basically *'the distress produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment'*. The word was first coined by Australia Glenn Albrecht to describe the impact of open-pit mining in NSW.

Personal Response

Examine Essay titles on the 'Intro to Identity' handout and identify ways in which Eriksen can help to inform your argument in both cases.

1. **"Processes of globalisation such as travel, commerce and ICT are breaking down national cultures and identities and creating a cosmopolitan culture and a cosmopolitan identity."**
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.
2. **"Identify the positive and negative effects of developing a sense of ethnic identity, including: - the benefits associated with achieving a secure and confident sense of one's own ethnic identity. - the risks of inter-ethnic violence and genocide related to an insecure or threatened sense of ethnic identity."**
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
 - d.

Reading Tip: A lot of Eriksen's work is very accessible, not surprising given that one of his main goals was to make Anthropology a more accessible to everyday readers. You should also approach it as being very 'interdisciplinary', drawing in ideas and approaches from lots of different academic areas.

Links to other aspects of the course

Ideas around Identity and Globalization turn up in multiple areas of the Politics & Society Course. As you consider other perspectives, try and see where Eriksen agrees with and contradicts other Key Thinkers...

1. Eriksen directly refutes Huntington's view of the 'Clash of Civilizations', arguing that his 'Clashing Scales' is a more "instructive, versatile and useful" way of framing the issue. C of C falls down for Eriksen primarily because "much of the fighting takes place among Muslims, and insurgents such as Daesh ('IS') and Boko Haram can scarcely be seen as representatives of 'Muslim Civilization'.
2. By arguing that the 'Double Bind' exists, and that there may be a fundamental problem with the very notion of seemingly contradictory terms such as 'Sustainable' and 'Development', Eriksen offers one of the few useable criticisms on our course of the UN agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. When referring to the SDGs, it's important not just to accept them as the solution to all of the world's ills, but rather they should be examined critically.
3. Compare Eriksen's ideas around Identity Politics with Anderson's 'Imagined Communities' hypothesis. Where is the common ground between the two, and what differences can you easily identify? Similarly, can you put your finger on what the precise difference is between Globalization and Cosmopolitanism?

Favourite Moment: Ireland features in 'Overheating'! The example of the now-extinct Irish Elk illustrates the 'Runaway Process' where the animal's greatest asset, the 'reproductive advantage' of big antlers, suddenly became its biggest problem when it lost mobility and was out consumed by smaller herbivores.

Globalization and the Politics of Identity

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, UN Chronicle, Autumn 1999

In a certain, important sense, the present human world is more tightly integrated than at any earlier point in history. In the age of the jet plane and satellite dish, the age of global capitalism, the age of ubiquitous markets and global mass media, various commentators have claimed that the world is rapidly becoming a single place. Although this slightly exaggerated description has an important point to make, a perhaps even more striking aspect of the post-cold war world is the emergence -- seemingly everywhere -- of identity politics whose explicit aim is the restoration of rooted tradition, religious fervour and/or commitment to ethnic or national identities.

It is doubtless true that globalization is a pervasive tendency influencing the lives of people everywhere -- from the Amazon rainforest to Japanese cities. The concept has recently become a fashionable one, and as a result, its meaning is becoming fuzzy. I would propose, therefore, a view of globalization as *all the sociocultural processes that contribute to making distance irrelevant*. It has important economic, political and cultural dimensions, as well as equally important ethical implications. Truly global processes affect the conditions of people living in particular localities, creating new opportunities and new forms of vulnerability. Risks are globally shared in the age of the nuclear bomb and potential ecological disasters. On the same note, the economic conditions in particular localities frequently (some would say always) depend on events taking place elsewhere in the global system. If there is an industrial boom in Taiwan, towns in the English Midlands will be affected. If oil prices rise, this implies salvation for the oil-exporting Trinidadian economy and disaster for the oil-importing Barbadian one.

Patterns of consumption also seem to merge in certain respects; people nearly everywhere desire similar goods, from cellular phones to readymade garments. Now, naturally a precondition for this to happen is the more or less successful implementation of certain institutional dimensions of modernity, notably that of a monetary economy -- if not necessarily waged work and literacy. The ever-increasing transnational flow of commodities, be they material or immaterial, seems to create a set of common cultural denominators which threaten to eradicate local distinctions. The hot-dog (*halal* or not, as the case may be), the pizza and the hamburger (or, in India, the lamburger) are truly parts of world cuisine; identical pop songs are played at identical discotheques in Costa Rica and Thailand; the same Coca-Cola commercials are shown with minimal local variations at cinemas all over the world, and so on. Investment capital, military power and world literature are similarly being disembedded from the constraints of space; they no longer belong to a particular locality. With the development of the jet plane, the satellite dish and more recently, the Internet, distance no longer seems a limiting factor for the flow of influence, investments and cultural meaning.

Globalization is, in other words, not merely another word for the growing transnational economy. It is true that it is largely driven by technology and economic interests, but it must be kept in mind that it encompasses a wide range of processes that are not in themselves technological or economic. Take the human rights discourse, for example: In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the ideas and values associated with human rights have spread from educated elites worldwide (and not just, as some wrongly believe, in the West) to villagers and farmers in remote areas. The rapid dissemination of human rights ideas is probably one of the most spectacular successes of globalization.

At the same time, we have in recent years witnessed the growth, in very many societies in all continents, of political movements seeking to strengthen the collective sense of uniqueness, often targeting globalization

processes, which are seen as a threat to local distinctiveness and self-determination. A European example with tragic consequences is the recent rise of ethnic nationalism in Croatia and Serbia, but even in the more prosperous and stable European Union, strong ethnic and nationalist movements have grown during the 1990s, ranging from Scottish separatism to the anti-immigration Front National in France. In Asia, two of the most powerful recent examples are the rise of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan and the meteoric success of the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, "Party of the Indian People") in India; and many African countries have also seen a strong ethnification of their politics during the last decade, as well as the rise of political Islam in the north. In the Americas, various minority movements, from indigenous groups to African Americans, have with increasing success demanded cultural recognition and equal rights. In sum, politics in the 1990s has to a great extent meant identity politics.

This new political scene, difficult to fit into the old left–right divide, is interpreted in very different ways by the many academics and journalists who have studied them. This is partly because identity politics comes in many flavours: Some are separatist nationalist movements; some represent historically oppressed minorities which demand equal rights; some are dominant groups trying to prevent minorities from gaining access to national resources; some are religious, some are ethnic, and some are regional. Many writers see identity politics in general as an anti-modern counterreaction to the individualism and freedom embodied by globalization, while others see it as the defence of the weak against foreign dominance, or even as a concealed strategy of modernization. Some emphasise the psychological dimension of identity politics, seeing it as nostalgic attempts to retain dignity and a sense of rootedness in an era of rapid change; others focus on competition for scarce resources between groups; some see identity politics as a strategy of exclusion and an ideology of hatred, while yet others see it as the trueborn child of socialism, as an expression of the collective strivings of the underdog.

Neither of these interpretations and judgements tells the whole story, both because the concrete movements in question differ and because the phenomenon of identity politics is too complex for a simple explanation to suffice. What is clear, however, is that the centripetal or unifying forces of globalization and the centrifugal or fragmenting forces of identity politics are two sides of the same coin, two complementary tendencies which must be understood well for anyone wishing to make sense of the global scene at the turn of the millennium.

For a variety of reasons, **globalization creates the conditions for localization**, that is various kinds of attempts at creating bounded entities -- countries (nationalism or separatism), faith systems (religious revitalization), cultures (linguistic or cultural movements) or interest groups (ethnicity). For this reason, a more apt term, coined by sociologist Roland Robertson, might be **glocalization**. I shall now present some features that the "glocal" identity movements of the turn of the millennium seem to have in common.

First, identity politics always entails **competition over scarce resources**. Successful mobilisation on the basis of collective identities presupposes a widespread belief that resources are unequally distributed along group lines. "Resources" should be interpreted in the widest sense possible, and could in principle be taken to mean economic wealth or political power, recognition or symbolic power -- although what is usually primarily at stake are either economic or political resources.

Secondly, **modernisation and globalization actualize differences and trigger conflict**. When formerly discrete groups are integrated into shared economic and political systems, inequalities are made visible, since direct comparison between the groups becomes possible. In a certain sense, ethnicity can be described as the process of making cultural differences comparable, and to that extent, it is a modern phenomenon boosted

by the intensified contact entailed by globalization. You do not envy your neighbour if you are unaware of his existence.

Thirdly, ***similarity overrules equality ideologically***. Ethnic nationalism, politicized religion and indigenous movements all depict the in-group as homogeneous, as people "of the same kind". Internal differences are glossed over, and for this reason, it can often be argued that identity politics serves the interests of the privileged segments of the group, even if the group as a whole is underprivileged, since it conceals internal class differences.

Fourthly, ***images of past suffering and injustice are invoked***. To mention a few examples: Serbs bemoan the defeat at the hands of the Turks in Kosovo in 1389; leaders of the Hindu BJP have taken great pains to depict Mughal (Muslim) rule in India from the 1500s as bloody and authoritarian; and the African American movement draws extensively on the history of slavery. Even spokesmen for clearly privileged groups, such as anti-immigrant politicians in Western Europe, may argue along these lines.

Fifthly, ***the political symbolism and rhetoric evokes personal experiences***. This is perhaps the most important ideological feature of identity politics in general. Using myths, cultural symbols and kinship terminology in addressing their supporters, promoters of identity politics try to downplay the difference between personal experiences and group history. In this way, it becomes perfectly sensible for a Serb to talk about the legendary battle of Kosovo in the first person ("*We* lost in 1389"), and the logic of revenge is extended to include metaphorical kin, in many cases millions of people. The intimate experiences associated with locality and family are thereby projected onto a national screen.

Sixthly, ***first-comers are contrasted with invaders***. Although this ideological feature is by no means universal in identity politics, it tends to be invoked whenever possible, and in the process, historical facts are frequently stretched.

Finally, ***the actual social complexity in society is reduced to a set of simple contrasts***. As Adolf Hitler already wrote in *Mein Kampf*, the truly national leader concentrates the attention of his people on one enemy at the time. Since cross-cutting ties reduce the chances of violent conflict, the collective identity must be based on relatively unambiguous criteria (such as place, religion, mother-tongue, kinship). Again, internal differences are under-communicated in the act of delineating boundaries towards the frequently demonised Other.

Identity politics is frequently dismissed as an anachronistic survival from a time when kinship ("blood relations"), religion or local belonging formed the basis of politics. Against this view, it has been argued many times, always correctly, that although identity politics tends to be dressed in traditional garb, beneath the surface it is a product of modernity. The strong emotions associated with a tradition, a culture or a religion can never be mobilised unless people feel that it is under siege. To put it metaphorically: A fish knows nothing of water as long as it is surrounded by it, but the moment it is pulled out into the air, it develops an intense interest in the water & nostalgia for it. Indeed, it could be said that the fish discovers the water only the moment it is removed from it.

Viewed in this way, the collective emotions identity politics depend on reveal themselves to be deeply modern emotions associated with the sense of loss experienced in situations of rapid change. Ethnic nationalism, minority movements and politicized religion offer a larger share of the cake as well as a positive sense of self, and like it or not, these movements will remain influential in most parts of the world until something better comes along.