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Thomas Hylland Eriksen · Martina Visentin



Acceleration and Cultural Change

Dialogues from an
Overheated World

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Dialogues from an Overheated World

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Preface

How I Met THE

I met Thomas Hylland Eriksen during a brief research visit to Oslo in 2018. I was conducting interviews for a research project and, on the day of a terrible snowstorm, I was invited to his office. I had just read the Italian version of *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (2016) and, although I was in Oslo for other reasons, I had thought about writing to him. I was unaware of who he was. I had simply loved the book so much that I wanted to meet him just to tell him I had finally found a synthesis, a pair of glasses that even today helps me to see where I am going with my fieldwork. In *Overheating*, Eriksen raises a number of questions not considered in the current debate on globalization in its many local articulations and its ecological and social implications. He seeks the connections between the complex environmental, economic, and sociocultural dynamics of the contemporary world, dominated by processes of climate change and globalization. His approach is already stated in his *Small Places—Large Issues* published in 1995, which has now reached several editions, and that is to study large issues in local contexts. We therefore need to take a close look, as anthropology has always done (though we should also remember the contributions of much qualitative sociology already in the early days of the social sciences). Eriksen argues that an “overview” is fundamental, but we still need to “get close” to the dimension of the everyday in order to understand how people live in practice (p. XI). The two scales actually interpenetrate because the overview on a macro-scale overlooks the details of a micro-scale analysis. We could talk about a social anthropology, or an anthropological sociology, interested in the change that catastrophes bring about on the “human dimension” that still (perhaps briefly) characterizes the daily lives of social actors. The analytical focus then is not so much on the new social structure that generates incandescence, but on the simultaneous presence, the unbalanced co-presence of different, asymmetrical scales, times, and complexities that become indistinguishable. At the heart of the reflection is the simultaneous implementation of

contradictory, double bind processes: growth and degrowth; globalization and localization; rationalization and irrationality; seeking and abandoning identity; acceleration and deceleration; standardization and personalization; predictability and unpredictability; and so on. What struck me most about Eriksen's book is that it provides an overview based not only on the contributions of social research in general but, more specifically, on a considerable body of qualitative and ethnographic data. I began to study his "overheating approach" starting from *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age* of 2001. This overheating concept probably originates from three essays in which there is a continuous interplay between "a near moving away" and "a far moving closer" (Prandini 2019, in Visentin & Eriksen 2019). In 1993, Eriksen wrote *Being Norwegian in a Shrinking World. Reflections on Norwegian Identity*. The Norway he describes was just before the new millennium, when the European Union was still called the EC. He sketches a country whose inhabitants probably eat more hamburgers than fish balls. Jackie Collins's novels are more widely read than Bjrnson's peasant tales, and more than half of the population can make themselves understood in slightly broken American English. The impact of globalization is becoming visible even in remote parts of Norway, where local stores may have American names and everyone wears jeans, though the climate might warrant a different kind of clothing. These processes of cultural change are a source of great concern, and the author begins to reflect on what links a nation's identity to the processes of globalization. Some Norwegians fear the erosion of their cultural distinctiveness. Some lament the appearance of Anglicisms in the local dialect. Others worry about the standardizing and alienating effects of mass culture, of the American style. In the first part of the essay, a strong continuity emerges with the identity of the past, but the second part critically addresses the cultural construction of modern Norway and discusses some challenges to better-known perceptions of Norwegian identity. In another essay where we can find the seeds of Eriksen's overheating approach—*Stacking and Continuity. On Temporal Regimes* (Eriksen 2007)—the author notes a fundamental change in our Western culture: the time register from slow and linear becomes fast and momentary; the distinction between desirable and undesirable information is increasingly difficult to understand. Setting the MP3 player against the CD and the Web against the book, along with some examples from the world of music, Eriksen argues that in its extreme form, the information society can be seen as an ecosystem consisting of randomly connected, decontextualized signs, changing and evolving too fast for humans to follow. In Eriksen (2007, 45) we can find a concrete example of this logic looking at the rising of MP3. Each individual user puts together his or her personal totality by extracting fragments. The MP3 is to the CD what the Web is to the book. The Internet fits perfectly, and contributes in at least two ways, to the predominant neoliberal ideology. The World Wide Web (and multichannel television, and MP3, and flexible work) offers a flood of choice. On the other hand, however, it causes us to lose, among other things, internal cohesion, meaningful content, and slowness. If we try to move from MP3 metaphor to the temporal dimension (2007, 47 and ff.), this means that since there is no more vacant time in

which to spread information, it is compressed and implied in time intervals that become shorter and shorter.

This acceleration, along with an exponential growth in the amount of information, leads to what he describes as vertical stacking (translated in Italian as “vertical crowding” to emphasize the lack of any rational, hierarchical idea of cumulability. Eriksen warns us that vertical stacking threatens internal development in postmodern culture because it becomes increasingly difficult to create narratives and sequences with a temporal continuity. This is a further step forward in which the author sees another overheating process. So, a process of shrinkage implicitly (or even explicitly) generates the idea that music (or art in general) is now a set of combinations, “a filling of boxes” (2007, 291). This essay also demonstrates Eriksen’s musical expertise (and passion for music). The third essay I want to mention is *Creolization and Creativity*, published in 2003. Eriksen had already presented the concept of Creolization in 1999 (in *Tu Dimunn Pu Vini Kreol: The Mauritian Creole and the Concept of Creolization*), but *Creolization and Creativity* contains another strong example of how the idea of overheating was emerging as a way of interpreting the world through Eriksen’s eyes. Starting from the assumption that cultural globalization is really happening (and this is easy to demonstrate, in the sense of an intensified and accelerated contact across geographical boundaries at least), mediated by information technology, we can begin by naïvely asking—as many do—whether these processes lead to an increase in creativity or have a general “flattening” effect. Eriksen compares three very different examples (postcolonial literature, information technology, and minority youth in Western Europe) and shows that the most important form of information society is a combination of cognitive nonlinearity and social openness: movement and openness. On the other hand, a society that has unwittingly relinquished its moorings—the kind of overheated society that we have become—tends to become incandescent, and only manageable in a state of emergency.

This brings us to this book of interviews, the outcome of a long dialogue that took place in the midst of life, in between cancer and a pregnancy, in a time of marked uncertainty, an unfinished pandemic, a war in Europe, and an unprecedented climate, cultural, and social crisis. I suggested to Thomas that we pool the emails we had exchanged through some focused conversations, and we began putting together a project for a book—and, with Springer’s support, here it is. As there were no strong time constraints, our long-distance Zoom exchanges were interspersed with pauses for reflection and requests for clarification. The Zoom conversations were recorded and reviewed and revised by both authors.

What I am keen to convey about Eriksen’s way of working is his ability as a scholar to cross the boundaries between disciplines. With this in mind, this brief introduction outlines the core concepts of the overheating approach, concluding with a small guide to help readers navigate among such diverse topics.

Can a Cloud Be Photographed? How We Worked on the Book

Eriksen's reflections are obviously a work in progress, and trying to describe and analyze an approach is like trying to capture the shape of a cloud in a photograph—difficult at best, and sometimes impossible. Eriksen's ethnography is a continuous interplay between the localization and the globalization of the word. Going along with Bourdieu in *La misère du monde* (1993), the social scientist's methodological rigor, objectivity, and neutrality can only reside in an integral respect for and, at the same time, an "active" protection of the word they receive. Taking Eriksen's theoretical and methodological approach, large- and small-scale phenomena can be interpreted across shared and different elements, which can be examined together. It is not a matter of relativity or omniscience, but of the feasibility of using this approach to better understand global and local interconnections through a new and original overview. The capacity of Eriksen's approach to embrace and interpret complexity is undeniable, not only because he is one of the most often cited authors (in Google Scholar he is cited by 24,000 people; in Scopus he has an h-index of 18), but also and especially because he is one of the most highly regarded authors in the social sciences. Another factor to bear in mind is that Eriksen's approach has often been appreciated by a wide audience of non-specialists. This certainly comes down to Eriksen's strong conviction that anthropology can be a public issue and that an intellectual can have a public engagement (see Chap. 5). This book does not delve into how Eriksen's personal and intellectual life are interlaced. At times, in some conversations, it is self-evident. His intellectual life remains strongly and clearly connected with his personal life, and from scrolling through his list of publications, this scholar's commitment to sharing his approach with people of all backgrounds, origins, and social classes is evident.

A Guide for Readers

In Eriksen's anthropology, there is a precise conceptual inventory represented by a few key terms that help readers understand his theoretical approach and locate the effects and paradoxes of accelerated change. They are (i) double bind; (ii) flexibility; (iii) out-of-control processes, or the "treadmill syndrome"; (iv) reproduction; and (v) the Anthropocene. First of all, we also present a small overview of what overheating approach is and then follow the conceptual inventory.

Overheating Approach Overheating is a metaphor, and it's easily misunderstood, because when you say overheating, people will immediately think about climate change or about the warming planet. But overheating and such refers to accelerated change in general. Modernity has always been associated with change, with speed, with development, and so on and so forth. And there is a real sense in which only

since the 1990s that this speed has sped up, so it's become even faster. We see this in a number of fields (see Eriksen 2016). Eriksen could say that it is similar to what happens when you rub your hands together really quickly: they warm up. The problem, as Eriksen sees it in today's world, is that we see all of these accelerated processes of change and various developments that are growing and accelerating without a thermostat, without a regulating mechanism which tells them it's time to stop. Using the ethnographic and comparative methods of anthropology connecting macro and micro social processes, Eriksen goes through different processes (energy use, urbanization, deprivation, human (im)mobility, and the spread of technology) underlining how they are perceived and responded to a local level.

Double Bind The concept derives from Gregory Bateson's ecological thinking. Double bind theory was coined and developed by that interdisciplinary thinker and a few people he worked with at Palo Alto (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* [1972]7). Bateson's thinking is relational, and the term refers to complementary situations in which contradictory messages are received. It concerns the compulsion to distinguish between two mutually inconsistent alternatives. The only thing that can save you from a double bind is the realization that the question was wrongly raised, or that there is a third alternative. A double bind differs from simply choosing between any two alternatives, from a dilemma where one option seems less disadvantageous than the other, or from situations in which we can avoid choosing by abandoning the game. In the double bind, the alternatives are equally good or bad, and we have to make a choice. Eriksen uses this concept to highlight the contradiction that links growth and sustainability (2016, 32), as nowadays it seems impossible to have both. Experiences of double binding can be found in our daily lives too. There is a strong drive to promote an environmentally responsible behavior. We are often encouraged to use public transport instead of our own car, or to buy organic or locally produced food, etc. At the same time, we can travel by air occasionally for business or pleasure, and our lives have become completely dependent on an economy reliant on fossil fuels. On a broader scale, and in many parts of the planet, politicians and businessmen have begun to talk about sustainability and climate policy, but also about fostering economic growth, which almost always involves increasing energy consumption. On a higher level of abstraction, the tension between economic development and human sustainability has become chronic, upping the cost of the most important double bind of twenty-first-century capitalism.

Flexibility This is another concept from Bateson that Eriksen draws on, which is found in *Ecology and Flexibility in Urban Civilization* (Bateson, 1970). The idea of flexibility is defined as a "potential, uncommitted, for change." In analyzing this concept, Bateson warns of two fundamental dangers concerning the loss of flexibility: adopting behaviors that offer short-term benefits can lead to rigidities that are hard to remove, but also to the formation of attitudes that are also hard to remove. Habituation and repetition, for example, may be adaptive responses that serve an immediate purpose, but may in the long run become an obstacle to the survival and evolution of a system's ecology. For Bateson, the flexibility used and exhausted by growing human populations has reduced the flexibility of the environment. To better

clarify his use of Bateson's concept, Eriksen cites (2016, 33) the metaphor used by Bateson himself of the acrobat on a tightrope. To keep his balance on the rope, the acrobat has to move from one position of instability to another. This demands great flexibility in the positioning of his arms and the speed of their movements (the variables involved) in order to maintain his stability during his performance. Similarly, according to Bateson, the flexibility of a system relies on its ability to keep many of its acceptable variables within certain limits. Eriksen applies this concept to a number of global scenarios (p.32ff.).

On a planetary scale, he considers the example of the fossil fuel revolution. The increase in flexibility deriving from the use of fossil fuels—enabling us to move easily, generate electricity, and so on—has tragically reduced the flexibility of the world's natural system. According to Eriksen, with a steadily increasing global population, returning to a pre-fossil-fuel economy would be desirable and increasingly necessary, but difficult to achieve. When flexibility increases in one area it tends to decline in another. Eriksen looks to India, for instance. Its Green Revolution had enabled the country to leave famine and poverty behind. But today the country looks like it is stuck in a cul-de-sac. India will no longer be able to return to pre-industrial agricultural practices. There has been a loss of flexibility, but this might be restored by technological innovations capable of combining high food production levels with long-term ecological sustainability.

Treadmill Syndrome or Out-of-Control Processes To clarify the above-described phenomena, Eriksen uses the concept of the “treadmill syndrome” (see, e.g., Eriksen 2017; 2016, 31). He cites the encounter between Alice and the Red Queen (in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*), when Alice is told to run as fast as she can. She does so but finds that—although she is running with all her might—she stays where she is. According to Eriksen, competition—be it in advertising or sports, in biological evolution or public activity in academia—demands that we continue to adapt just to keep our place in our ecosystem. The treadmill syndrome is just another sign of a vast process of intensification of the competition, which can sometimes become destructive, both environmentally and existentially.

Reproduction Eriksen believes that people everywhere today are constantly struggling to retain the right to define themselves, decide their own destiny, and protect their autonomy. This happens in every aspect of life, economically, culturally, and environmentally. Faced with their own fragility, they may want to lay the blame somewhere else; it has to be someone else's fault. The data presented on the rising levels of resentment in our countries may be a good example of this situation. Chapter 4 in this book addresses the issue of ideological overheating and examines this issue in more depth.

Anthropocene This term popularized by the Nobel laureate in atmospheric chemistry, Paul Crutzen, is another way of describing the consequences of acceleration, but on a large scale. Everything human is so invasive and growing so constantly that it threatens to overpower other species (plants and animals). Eriksen reminds us that, in today's world, humans are increasingly abundant on our planet, while the

numbers of other species continue to decline. Our world seems to have accelerated in everything and everywhere, so that every phenomenon seems to be constantly on the verge of becoming unmanageable, because speed and overheating have acquired a momentum almost to the point of incandescence. It is a new world, one that needs to be continuously re-examined, from top to bottom, and from left to right. This book provides conceptual tools and stories, theoretical perspectives, and facts about the world as it is today, but first and foremost, it invites the reader to continue the conversation on their own. Survival will depend on diversity and local solutions. For this we shall need flexibility, intellectual imagination, and the recognition that slowing down, cooling down, and scaling down will only mean the end of the destructive, predatory growth economy and not the end of civilization as we know it.

1991: The Overheating Year

Dear reader, don't forget 1991. It is the year, according to Eriksen's analysis, from which it all starts. It is the "turning point" year in which we see a continuous acceleration of social processes (Eriksen 2016, p. 472 specifically):

1. It was the year in which the Cold War ended in its original form;
 - in the same year, the Indian economy was massively deregulated by Rajiv Gandhi's government;
 - the Apartheid became a closed chapter (Mandela had been released from prison the year before);
 - 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;
 - different social scientists, many of them former supporters of deregulation, wrote scathing critiques of the emerging neoliberal global economy (e.g., Stiglitz 2002);
 - the war in Yugoslavia and the Rwandan genocide were reminders that identities based on kinship remained crucial for millions, and identity crises could erupt in horrible ways at any time;
 - the borders of and in Europe became more permeable, negotiable, and fuzzy than before;
 - the spreading of mobile telephones and the Internet began to circulate epidemically in the global middle classes, eventually trickling down to the poor as well.
2. A certain kind of flexibility grew: you could soon work anywhere and anytime, but these technologies contributed to fragmentation as well; what flexibility was gained with respect to space seemed to be lost regarding time.

As Eriksen wrote from 1991 onward, "Life began to stand still at a frightful speed" (2016, 474).

This book presents discussions in an interview-form approach that I have been studying for a few years, and I thought it might be an additional stepping stone for

further studies. The intention of this volume is to introduce academic and non-academic readers to a novel approach to globalization, capable of synthesizing and interpreting social change that has been happening at lightning speed, unequally and unevenly. The analytical focus then goes not so much to the new social structure that generates overheating and incandescence but to the simultaneous presence or to the unbalanced co-presence of different, asymmetrical scales, times, and complexities that appear so inextricable. In the future, I hope to further study the origin of this approach by showing how the intellectual field has given space to this concept-metaphor.

Padova, Italy
Oslo, Norway
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Martina Visentin
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Introduction: Tensions of Overheated Globalization

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.” Thus begins Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel by an author best known for his penetrating depictions of his contemporary England. Though the story is set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution, the above quotation could read as an acute and accurate description of the world in the early twenty-first century. We live in an era of great technological innovations and unparalleled economic growth on a global level. World trade has trebled in just thirty years (since 1991), and the rising demand for goods has meant that the size of container ships has also increased threefold in less than twenty years. Food production continues to increase, and in spite of a considerable rise in the world’s population, there is theoretically enough food for all eight billion of us. Life expectancy remains high in most parts of the world—the average longevity worldwide now twice as high as it was in the time of *A Tale of Two Cities*.

At the same time, we live on a period of anthropogenic climate change and large-scale environmental destruction, with the extinction of numerous species. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issues stern warnings in all of its reports, arguing ever more strongly for the need to leave behind the fossil fuel economy as it may cause immense suffering to humans and other species in the coming decades. It is also worth mentioning that social inequality has been increasing since the 1980s in many countries.

New communication and information technologies, and smartphones in particular, have enabled social networking without boundaries, and made a wealth of information available across the world. Since they were first introduced in 2007 (when the concept initially attracted little interest), the number of smartphone subscriptions around the world has reached the almost unbelievable figure of 6.8 billion at the time of writing, which means—even if some have two or more—that most earthlings now have one (Statista 2023). People everywhere now have the chance to

be better informed and better connected with each other. They can gain some control over their lives through various services available on the Internet.

Over time, the rise in hate speech and polarization in social media, the spread of conspiracy theories, and the seductive lies proliferating across the Web have become a cause of serious anxiety, demanding the sustained attention of researchers studying political violence and the future of democracy. It has frequently been said, however, that the dissemination of the Internet in the 1990s did not generally lead to populations becoming better educated and more knowledgeable. The exponential growth in the amount of information available on the Internet and the speed with which it circulates do not seem to have led to the world's citizens being better informed. A distinction between data, information, knowledge, and wisdom may shed light on the situation. The amount of data available to the online denizens of the world is unlimited. Some of it is turned into information about anything from the British royal family to football results or casualties in the Ukrainian war, but such fragments only become knowledge when contextualized and used by one or several conscious subjects to make sense of the world. Wisdom is achieved only at a higher logical level when several sources of knowledge have been digested and synthesized into a coherent worldview. Easy solutions which should not be mistaken with knowledge of a field consist in withdrawing into echo-chambers, choosing the path of least resistance—opting for infotainment rather than complex (but important) information, or sensationalist, and often misleading, information “proving that the experts are wrong” rather than cautious, complex, often ambiguous, scientifically founded knowledge. In these times, when everything seems to stand still at enormous speed (Eriksen 2001), it has become difficult to use the Internet sensibly, to distinguish between trustworthy information and vacuous gossip, and to concentrate on a subject for more than a few seconds.

It goes without saying that very different interpretations of globalization and its implications exist, but most researchers in the field would agree that the last few decades have seen an acceleration and proliferation of networks and connections, national as well as transnational. Whether we look at air travel (the number of plane tickets sold doubled between 2004 and 2019, from two billion to 4.5 billion), international trade, people active on social media, international meetings, academic events, transnational NGOs, and virtually any sphere involving enhanced transnational connectivity, the trend always points upward. As the COVID-19 pandemic has painfully reminded us, physical connections differ in quality from digital links. The latter have several advantages, the most obvious being that they enable fully deterritorialized communications. Online, you can talk with anybody anywhere. Their main disadvantage lies in the lack of physical proximity. Being together in the same room, seated around the same table, or walking along the same footpath, we can experience human warmth and acquire memories that we could never enjoy online. Leaving aside the exceptional situation engendered by the pandemic, far more transnational physical connections have been activated and nurtured (in addition to the digital ones) in the last few decades than ever before in history.

Intensified contact across boundaries through trade, leisure, business, and political activities, crisscrossing national and continental boundaries, might be expected

to give the actors a more cosmopolitan less nationalist outlook. Many millions now have experience of foreign travel, as well as friends and colleagues from other countries. They are aware that we all take part in a dense network of communications, travel, and trade covering every continent and nearly every country. People's sense of identity, which historically expanded from kin and tribe to cities, regions, and nation-states, could now perform a new qualitative jump to a higher level of human solidarity and care, comparable to the abstract communities created by the monotheistic religions of conversion. This did happen in some quarters, but reactions against the dissolution of borders and global flows often proved more visible, insistent, and consequential. The Brexit vote in the UK is often mentioned as a typical example, but there are many other signs of a tendency to re-establish borders, glorify cultural roots, build fences, and reject post-national identities. The popularity of the Hindu nationalist government in India expresses a profound pride in India's great achievements, but to the detriment of the country's minorities, the largest of which is the Muslim population of about 200 million. Viktor Orban's considerable appeal in Hungary similarly draws on a proud celebration of everything Hungarian, but ethnic and other minorities (such as sexual ones) are not invited to the party. And we should not be allowed to forget how, in his victory speech in November 2016, Trump repeated two words over and over, namely "America first," as he pranced back and forth on the stage.

Reactions against the perceived alienation resulting from disembedded modernity may also lead to other forms of withdrawal into smaller, clearly delineated groups, be they right-wing militants, Islamists, or others. It would be premature and facile to conclude that the world is moving toward a generalized neo-nationalism, becoming a place where outsiders are met first and foremost with suspicion. Rather, there is a structural tension between "roots" and "boots" detectable almost everywhere in the contemporary world, where the politics of identity have taken over from the class politics that characterized much of the last century. We are divided by a shared destiny.

In the above quotation, Dickens suggests that profound contradictions exist—between those who are free and those who are not, between the rich and the poor, and between the secure and the vulnerable. But he also offers a bittersweet glimpse of a brighter future when he juxtaposes "the spring of hope" with "the winter of despair." In our times, there may be good reason to be hopeful. Never before in human history have so many people enjoyed such satisfying and fulfilling lives as today. As optimists like to point out, starvation and illiteracy are declining, while the proportion of people with grid electricity and flush toilets is increasing (albeit sluggishly in some areas).

The reasons for despair are arguably even more compelling, however. We have already mentioned the anthropogenic effects on the climate as a looming threat to human survival. There is also a powerful sense of vulnerability, of a lack of social progress, which partly explains the rise of identity politics opposed to global integration. At the micro level, a great many young people, from Southern Europe to South America, have been convinced following the 2007–8 financial crisis that they will be less well-off than their parents. For the first time in several generations,

progress is not expected or taken for granted. The future may look bleak to many, but it seems uncertain to all.

This is partly because of the realization that global integration generates economic, political, and existential vulnerabilities. The huge container ship *Ever Given* that ran aground in spring 2021, blocking the Suez Canal for weeks, showed how fragile global networks can be when they fail to operate predictably; the economic losses amounted to billions of pounds every day. A year earlier, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic was also a poignant reminder of the fact that we are not in control; hazards capable of turning the world as we know it upside down can arrive with no warning. Since February 2022, the Russian assault on Ukraine has sent successive shockwaves throughout the global economy. This hostile and brutal attack is a tangible reminder that communication and collaboration networks on which the global system relies have been disrupted, not least because different governments have different interpretations and positions on this war. Grain exports from Russia and Ukraine have been dramatically reduced, imperiling food security in African countries. The EU's decision to stop importing Russian natural gas immediately prompted energy shortages and economic decline in large European countries such as Germany. And the ideal of an international community seemed further from its realization than since the Second World War.

Any narrative on modernity based on the assumption that we shall continue to see economic growth, progress, and development until the end of this century is ill-informed and lacking in foresight. The global system is out of control, and growth is increasingly—and correctly—seen as inherently destructive. Changes are taking place faster and faster, and there are no brakes available to slow things down.

As a metaphor and an analytical framework for grappling with this fundamentally destabilized global system, we use the term *overheating* as a condensed symbol and descriptive concept, around which the conversations that make up this book gravitate. The term was introduced by Eriksen in 2016: his book *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* draws attention to the tensions, conflicts, and friction engendered by accelerated change, implicitly signaling the need to examine, through dialectical negation, the possibility of decelerating, or cooling down. Generally speaking, when things are suddenly set in motion, they create friction, and when things rub against each other, heat is generated at the interface. When it catches us unawares, heat can make us irascible or apathetic, but it may also trigger a number of other changes, the trajectories of which may not be clear at the outset. When water, for instance, is brought to boiling point, it actually changes into a different substance. In a similar fashion, we are now living in a time of transition, as economic, social, and cultural forms of globalization expand into ever new territories, often reshaping in fundamental ways the lives and customs of those caught up in the whirlwinds of change.

These processes are not simply negative or positive for those affected by them: what some perceive as a crisis could well represent an opportunity for others, and there is always potential for spontaneous transformative moments. Even climate change is sometimes welcomed, for example, in cold regions where farming is becoming feasible, or in States competing for influence in the far north, where the

melting of the Arctic ice creates exciting opportunities for oil companies and may lead to the opening of new shipping routes. Overheating, in the sense used here, consists in a series of unintended, interrelated consequences of global neoliberal deregulation, technological developments that make communications instantaneous and transportation inexpensive, increased energy consumption, and a consumerist ethos that animates the desires of a growing world population.

Changes in economic, social, and environmental circumstances are often perceived locally as exogenous, in the sense that large segments of the societies affected did not initiate the changes themselves. In fact, while some local key actors usually collaborate in bringing these changes about (and benefit from them), a good number of people are generally left with the feeling that the powers that be never even asked for their opinion on the matter. Rapid changes in the social fabric may influence, challenge, or sometimes even strengthen people's perceptions of themselves and of the society to which they belong, who they are, and where they are going. Making social and cultural identities sustainable in a world where change is unpredictable, is frequently exogenous, and often has unintended consequences is like rebuilding a ship at sea. It requires flexibility and improvisation, or novel forms of boundary-making. Others may discover that they are committed to change in such a way that it is stagnation, rather than change, that challenges their self-understanding, or they may approach changes underway around them with a lack of care and a fundamental sense of indifference.

In the conversations that make up this book, we cover a lot of ground. We speak of the structural precarity (lack of job security) among young Southern Europeans, Australians' reactions to wildfires and flooding, slowing down as an antidote to overheating, species becoming extinct, and the new politics of identity, among other things. What holds the seemingly disparate themes together is the analytical concept of overheating as a tool developed to make sense of the partial connections characterizing a world in which fast change is endemic, but where different parts change at different speeds. Using the overheating approach as a research tool brings new evidence to light. To name just a few insights that have come up in the course of these conversations: not everything changes at the same speed; family life evolves more slowly than habits acquired through using a smartphone; and eating habits may be less susceptible to change than the structuring of the workday. Some places, typically cities, change more visibly and dramatically than rural areas, where temporal regimes are more stable. The pace of life has accelerated, but the lifespan that takes us from childhood through adolescence to adulthood and old age remains constant. In other words, the temporalities in which people live are not in sync with each other but are desynchronized by overheating. The analytical focus then turns not to the new social structure that generates overheating, but to the simultaneous presence, the unbalanced concomitant presence of different, asymmetrical scales, times, and complexities that appear more and more inextricable. The perspective from which this book was conceived stems from the shared idea that knowledge takes paths that are often complementary, even contradictory, but never unambiguous.

Rather than rejecting modernity and the legacy of the Enlightenment as a failed experiment, we discuss alternative ways for humanity to stand on the shoulders of giants in order to see further afield. At the moment, history has lost its way. Perhaps, from the debris of a dysfunctional, destructive, overheated world a wiser, slower, more considerate, less insensitive modernity may rise, without relinquishing its former achievements, but willing to learn from its mistakes.

The final lines of the first paragraph in Dickens's novel are cited much more rarely than the famous opening. After speaking of the spring of hope and the winter of despair, he goes on to say: "We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only."

This passage can be read as a warning against "hubris"¹ and easy fixes. There are no simple solutions. The promise of a brighter future is only credible if those presently alive accept that muddling through will be the order of the day, through myriad compromises, a plurality of solutions, and a willingness to listen respectfully to others. What follows are our thoughts. Feel free to disagree.

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Chapter 1

Lessons from the Pandemic: A Window of Opportunity?



Abstract In this conversation, which took place in December 2021, we attempted to take stock of what the pandemic represented. The reader will recall that across the world, including both Italy and in Norway, we were still in the midst of the pandemic: it was unclear and impossible to predict how we might continue with our daily lives. This conversation tries to find the leitmotif of an experience that united the whole world. From both authors' point of view, we wanted to try and make people see an opportunity within a crisis (following one of the principles of the overheating approach).

A Shared Shock

Thomas: I think we all have something to learn from the Covid pandemic. It has changed our general outlook. It will have a lasting influence because we have been through an unexpected shock. It can be seen, from the lofty vantage-point of social science, as a global experiment. I think we need to discuss this in our first discussion since the pandemic has been on virtually everybody's mind for more than a year and a half now. It is also an indubitable fact that we as social scientists are directly affected by events in the outside world. I mean, after the 9/11 terrorist attack in the United States, everybody started to become interested in Islam, and geopolitics, and multiculturalism. Then and now, there has been a lot of general pessimism about diversity. I have seen in the last few years - maybe in the last 10 years, but certainly in the last five - that the environment and the climate are becoming *the* big topic in many intellectual discussions, and it has become almost trivial to speak of the destructive side-effects of capitalism.

What we saw in March 2020 was that everything in the physical world started to slow down. We are still feeling the effects on the economy and probably will for years because the logistically streamlined just-in-time economy ceased to function. Things simply did not arrive in time. The super-efficient economy has showed weaknesses and vulnerabilities. There has been a general slowdown, and it will last. There are queues of container ships waiting outside port cities, and so on. But while the physical world slowed down, the digital world just continued to accelerate,

to speed up. You have this curious sort of disconnect: in the physical world, you could go for slow walks and it was quiet outside, you couldn't travel anywhere, and you weren't even allowed to go to a restaurant since they were closed during the lockdowns; but when you went home and turned on the computer there were three things happening at the same time. You sent your messages while you were simultaneously meeting on Zoom and preparing a lecture, and activities became even more condensed than before. For me, this period has been very condensed, making it difficult to concentrate and almost impossible to work seriously because of the disruptions and interruptions. This compact digital life can be very detrimental to intellectual creativity. I will soon be going to Germany just to sit and work there for a week or so. But on a normal day, we now risk a double burden – physical and digital – because now society is opening up again. I was in Turin recently, but I also had to go to my room during the conference to give a Zoom lecture at home. So at the same time as we are continuing to have these online Zoom meetings, lectures, talks and conferences, lots of things are happening now in the physical world as well.

Risks of Accelerated Smart Working

Martina: I totally agree with you. But I don't know how to explain or get into the question ... what do we find in the middle? What you are saying is also about our profession. It's a sort of accelerated smart working, and in your writing I found perspectives on temporal regimes in which there are sort of two ideal types, meaning slow and fast time. But in the middle ground ... are we creating hybrid identities that live in mixed time regimes? What do you think about that?

Thomas: Yes, I'm sure, and maybe this is the source of a lot of stress - that there is a lack of consistency, this lack of convergence between these slow and fast, analogue and digital worlds of experience. It's hard to find a balance. And it seems that whatever you do, it's not quite what you wanted. And another thing we need to talk about – which has also come into the world in a big way – is social media, not least the way they are dealt with by young people. Their lives are increasingly filtered through the social media – some of which are not particularly social, by the way – that is the internet, to a much greater extent than before, and this also accelerated during the pandemic. The way in which the online world and the phenomenon of FOMO (fear of missing out) leads to life becoming staccato and full of sudden interruptions. It is very hard to lead a slow, cumulative life with constant interruptions. I'm sure you see this in your students as well, that it's almost impossible now to ask them to sit down and read a book for 3 h. Reading long texts has become hard work. So concentration is becoming a scarce resource, and that's a fairly damning indictment on our civilization when we consider the way in which we produce knowledge, since it can only be done slowly. The miracle of the Renaissance which took place right where you are now, in northern Italy, which in some ways created the modern world, presupposed the ability to perform one kind of task, really getting deeply into it and staying there for a long time. All of this had to be done

slowly without many interruptions. I wonder what's happening to knowledge production in the kind of temporal regime we have now, where you have the fast and the slow competing for your attention, and where the fast tends to win most of the duels.

Managing Contradictions and Hybrid Identities

Martina: Yes, that's clear but I have one more question... What you mean by a slow and a fast regime is clearer to me now. But the other question is about when you write, and people are talking to you, you always have an eye on the future, on the future perspective. So my question is also about where we are going in the middle of Covid-19: there are many mental health problems, for example, and it has an impact on our identity, or on the economic crisis. How do you think we can handle all these contradictions, interruptions through hybrid identities, and so on?

Thomas: Yes, it's a big question, isn't it? Do you remember, a few months ago, Facebook suddenly was unavailable owing to a technical glitch somewhere.¹ For 5 h, the platform was not working, but that was sufficient for the shutdown to have huge consequences. I read about it; I wasn't affected because I wasn't using Facebook on that day. To some, the enforced break may have been a relief. For my part, I started daydreaming that perhaps it would just vanish completely, forever. Another source of disruption and interruption would be gone. Obviously, that wasn't going to happen. But in other parts of the world, the shutdown of Facebook had serious consequences because many use the platform to perform their economic transactions. Millions of people, mostly operating in the informal sector, lost money and opportunities during those 5 h. This suggests that the social media platforms are truly global, but also that they are used for a variety of purposes. The Covid-19 pandemic was doubtless the most global event in human history, but the temporary collapse of Facebook comes close! We have had world wars, we have had the Spanish flu, but none of these large-scale events come even close to the pandemic or Facebook in global reach. Even the Black Death in the mid fourteenth century was mainly a Eurasian phenomenon. They didn't have it in the Americas. But Facebook is totally global (with some important exceptions, notably China, where 1.3 billion people have to use WeChat instead), with a reach from the Andes to the Philippines. And the same applies to the way in which the world is now becoming saturated with digital communication. You know, when Facebook went down for 5 h, people began to realize how dependent they were, how we have somehow sleepwalked into a kind of dependency that nobody really wanted, right? And all of a sudden you are like an opium addict, realizing that you cannot manage without it. By the way, this goes for smartphone apps in general. Here at my university, you can no longer park your car

¹On October 4, 2021, at 15:39 UTC, the social network Facebook and its subsidiaries, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, Mapillary, and Oculus, became globally unavailable for a period of 6–7 h (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Facebook_outage).

if you don't have a smartphone because you need an app. And among the effects of the very temporary shutdown of Facebook let me mention that in African countries like Zambia, people who were running market stalls and selling vegetables got problems with their suppliers because they couldn't get in touch with them. They had become accustomed to using services that were suddenly not available. So this extreme vulnerability as a result of the digital revolution somehow reflects, or mirrors, the same kinds of vulnerabilities that the Covid pandemic has made us aware of, and it is entirely global. So how does it affect us globally and locally? I think it is fair to say that the world economy is addicted to speed and efficiency everywhere; in countries with low productivity, there is a yearning for more of it, and in the affluent countries, the affluent classes complain that there is too much of it. Speed, meaning acceleration, is absolutely essential for global capitalism to grow since it intensifies productivity and consumption. You know, you can lie on the sofa and spend hundreds of thousands of euros on sports equipment that you're never going to use, or clothes, or holidays. It's become so easy to spend money, and to be able to be a consumer. So that's why I still think being in favor of slowness is one of the most radical political positions you can take because it goes against not only technology or Big Tech and the platforms, but also the logic of the economic system. And that's one of the dangers of the Covid pandemic. Maybe we can delve into this theme eventually, when we talk about the future in our last conversation. But maybe that's the kind of lesson that the powers that be don't want us to learn from the pandemic, namely that you can have a fairly good life without frantic activity, and life can even be better if you do less. I think maybe we can. We can think about that.

Digital Detox: Towards a Digital Slowing Down?

Martina: So, you see us as people who are addicted, stuck in a bubble that makes thousands of bubbles...

Thomas: Yeah, I think so. And what's frightening about this, if you look at the personal level, that is to say overheating of the individual, is that we have stumbled zombie-like into situations that nobody really wanted, and that we are increasingly seeing people complain about. There is a research project about 'digital detox' around here, and my wife is part of it. She worked in publishing for many years and then quit her job to do something else. Eventually, she accepted a PhD fellowship. So now (2023) she is writing about reading as a way of slowing down, as a form of 'digital detox'. At least that's an important part of the project. She is exploring the transformations in the publishing industry. Today, people don't seem to read books the way they used to, but they increasingly listen to audiobooks. In Scandinavia, audiobooks have really taken off in the last few years. It makes sense because they enable you to be more efficient through multitasking. You can listen to a book while cooking or gardening or exercising. You can drive to work or kayak with the book. It makes you a more efficient consumer.

The actual effects of the digital revolution depend very much on where you are. But it's still striking that many of the same rules have been imposed throughout the world. So we could say that, in many ways, this is the most global event ever regarding humanity. We've had world wars, we've had pandemics, we've had large and terrible famines and so on before, but nothing like this, where everyone on the planet is affected. I mean, almost eight billion people are affected by the pandemic. And, as everyone could point out, yes, they are affected in different ways. And I think we will talk more about that later, how the pandemic has been a magnifying glass on inequality. I do not think in particular about the way it has strengthened inequalities, but it is also striking that many of the same practices have been adopted in different countries. No matter where you are, rules concerning face masks, social distancing, restrictions on handshakes, hugging and physical contact in general have been very similar. And this, probably for many people, has been experienced as very restrictive, since there were so many things we used to take for granted, like going to a cafe with a friend or shaking hands and having a chat with a colleague, or just going to the post office and, you know, being in the middle of an anonymous crowd, which I think is good for people, even biologically, though I don't often think along these lines. But in this case, I make an exception by stating that the situation we've been in is quite unnatural. It's not natural for people, and it is striking how fast the new norms were established. From 1 day to the next, suddenly you were a dubious character if you weren't wearing a face mask, or if you did not respect social distancing. And this was the case in many parts of the world. I mean, there is resistance to this to varying degrees. The number of anti-vaxxers has been on the rise. And when face masks were introduced, there were many, not least in countries like the United States, who opposed this because they saw it as a violation of their personal freedom, identifying these restrictions with left-wing Democrats and the nanny state. If you were loyal to the president, you did not wear one. But apart from strange anomalies like the United States, it strikes me that the entire world has been synchronized around the pandemic and attempts to deal with it. So that's one aspect of it. And when we think about everyday rituals of interacting with each other, many of the rituals to which we were accustomed were suddenly no longer viable. You could no longer do the things you used to do. It had not occurred to us that it would suddenly, from 1 day to the next, be impossible to sit close together. We didn't think that would happen. And when it did, it had effects that many had not anticipated. One thing is the political polarization in the US, Brazil and some other countries, but it is far more significant how the restrictions created an awareness of the ways in which we need each other as something different from flat images on a screen. Loneliness and depression seemed to have become more widespread, and we now have some research indicating that this has in fact been the case. This tells us that you can be intensely lonely even if you can perfectly well communicate with the outside world, that physical co-presence, with body language, smell, gestures and so on is absolutely essential to human well-being.

Things to Be Learned from an Overheating Perspective

Martina: Well, we could come back about an to an invisible problem. My point is just to get to know your view on our world. Will we have lost our world, or will we have to reconstruct our world? I don't know....

Thomas: In some ways, from an overheating perspective, what happened in March 2020 worldwide is quite highly significant because, for 40 years, our business leaders, our politicians and so on told us that we should do as much as possible and be efficient, productive and mobile. We should travel, consume, produce and be active. The rationale was that this frantic activity benefited economic growth, although the message was presented to us as one increasing our freedom of choice. Then suddenly, from 1 day to another, we were told to do as little as possible. What our leaders said was basically that if you really have to, you can go out and take the bus, but please try not to. Don't bother to go shopping, since most shops are closed anyway and you can buy your essentials, your medicines, your food, but not much else. And don't even try to go out for a pizza or a glass of prosecco, since the cafes are going to be closed. In this way, the neoliberal dogma was turned on its head. And the question is, will we ever return to the situation the way it was before? I don't think so. There will be permanent changes following the pandemic. There is anxiety around the prospect of contamination still, and there will probably be throughout next year and maybe for a long time to come. Also, anxiety around travel, around physical contact. Then there are other things that we could also think about in terms of what kind of world we want to live in, what the lessons are that we hope to have learned. It just so happens that, as we speak now, there is a big climate summit meeting in Glasgow at COP26.² And many countries, most countries have committed to certain targets, but they're nowhere near achieving them. Now what happened with the pandemic, as we've seen, is that the world economy went into a recession, which is bad news for people who make profits, but it's good news for the environment. And the question is, is there something important to be learned here? Could we do things more slowly? Could we use this as a pretext to slow down and live a bit differently? There is a real possibility that the post-pandemic world will be scaled down, slowed down and cooled down. Interestingly, what people in many countries report that they have missed the most, according to surveys, is the informal social contact and physical proximity; not going out shopping or that sort of thing. It's being with other people (see e.g. CAMH 2022). This insight might also tell us that if we're going to make society more sustainable and more humane this doesn't need to entail the continued destruction of the ecological system. We can do it differently. And that is the thing that I think could be an optimistic lesson from this crisis that, in fact, we could use it to do things slightly differently in the future. So I don't think we will go back and we shouldn't. Now we should take this as a lesson. You know, the word crisis comes from Greek.

²Officially the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference, it took place from 31 October to 13 November.

In ancient Greece *krisis* usually referred to a high fever. There were only two possible outcomes, either you died or you recovered, since they didn't have antibiotics and vaccines. But if you did recover, and if you were a sensible Greek, then you would have learned something. When you wiped off the dust and sweat, came out of your secluded chamber and looked at the olive grove, peered at the sun and met people you knew, you realized that your life would never be quite the same again because you had been through a situation where you'd been hanging in the balance between life and death, and you had emerged on the right side. You were still alive, and you were wiser. You were more humble and maybe more grateful, and you found it easier to appreciate the small things in life. So perhaps one thing that we are going to appreciate more is the chance of being with other people.

Martina: This is another point that I want to ask you. For me, you have a very strong and positive, optimistic view of human beings. For me, maybe because I'm in Italy, OK, maybe because I'm Italian, so I live in a continuous crisis and we don't learn from our mistakes. We don't learn from our past. So, yes, overeating is a good way to observe our world. But now we are reflecting on a new world with all the concepts, so it is impossible to manage this entire process. . .

Thomas: Yeah, well I don't know. I mean, one view – which is not that unlikely – is that the world will only change as a result of cataclysmic change, when we really are forced to do something, when we simply have to do something, and when you feel that your life and your security are at stake. This also tells us that when you are in a critical situation, security seems to be more important than freedom. You know, you really are willing to give up quite a few of your freedoms. But now that it seems like we are heading in the right direction after the pandemic. I mean, the common view is that things will go back to what they were before really quickly. And there is so much pent-up energy that people need to expend travelling and consuming, and so on. And we have already seen hints of that. But maybe after a year or two, or three, many of us will look back and think that things weren't so bad during the enforced slowing down. Everybody agrees that it was dreadful not to be able to spend time with other people. But the fact that lots of events were cancelled, there was less travel, there was less stress, life became less frenzied, is the positive side of all these cancellations and postponements. And perhaps there's a lesson to be learned there, that we could take with us, but will not happen automatically. I'm not saying that this is easy. We have to conjure up a different and better future, some people have to make it visible. And this is how social change takes place, via the political imagination. There are promising signs. Obviously, there's a lot of negative signs, but there are also promising signs. Many think differently about the economy, and it has become easier to speak of basic minimum income without being seen as a clown or hippie. More people think seriously about a degrowth economy, which has suddenly now become less marginal than it was. And ways of organizing society, which are not destructive, not alienating, can now be imagined more easily.

And, again, what have we learned? I think what we've learned is that human beings need to be with other human beings, and we don't need to be so incredibly productive and, you know, stressed out, and so on. The things that matter the most to us are usually climate neutral and free.

But there is one other aspect that I wonder if I can mention now about the pandemic, because I find it quite interesting, and quite important to realize. I mean, the pandemic itself, the spread of Covid-19 is clearly an overheating phenomenon, and it happened in such an overheated way. In the space of just a few days it was worldwide, which says something about the interconnectedness of the world. So that's obvious. But, paradoxically, what it led to was a cooling down because suddenly the wheels of the world economy started to turn around much more slowly. Factories closed down. Some factories had to send their workers home because they couldn't get the machine parts they needed. Tourism disappeared overnight. Ten per cent of the world economy disappeared from 1 day to the next, which is dramatic. This happened in the physical world, and we weren't allowed to move. You could go for a walk in your neighborhood in most countries, but not everywhere. You Italians suffered more than us Norwegians. Perhaps, if you were lucky, if you lived in a sprawling city, like I do, we could go for a walk in the woods nearby. But you couldn't do many of the usual things that you did, such as go to concerts or football games, or cafes, or just walk down the main street in the sun licking an ice cream. This happened in the physical world. At the same time, in the digital world, acceleration just continued. Overheating just continued, with a vengeance. And someone who said quite early on that this is something we should be aware of was Naomi Klein (2020), the Canadian cultural critic. She said that, for many years, the politicians have been promising us a Green New Deal, that we should shift towards a more sustainable way of organizing our economy, but it seems as if what we are getting instead is a *screen* new deal, which means that many of us, millions of us, will be basically chained to computers 24 h a day in the service of profit for the great corporations or whatever (Klein 2020). And we can see the warning signs that people are stuck at home, they've been stuck at home, but many sit in front of their screens and the boundary between your free time and your working time is being eroded completely. It has been fuzzy for a long time, but now it seems to be almost gone.

Martina: Yes, I understand everything you told me, but I think we're living a kind of collective trauma, a sort of collective control trauma. So I don't think it's that easy to return to our lives just before the pandemic.

Thomas: I don't think so. That's one thing. I mean, if you think about this, in a micro-sociological way, with a focus on the way we lead our daily lives. No, I don't think so. I mean, this anxiety disorder is partly caused by a concern about a third or fourth wave, or maybe a new kind of virus, a new pandemic that is even more deadly than what we have. There is more uncertainty and anxiety in the world than for a long time. This is something we are going to have to live with.

Martina: That is why I think we haven't learned anything from this crisis, this pandemic. It's not been an opportunity to become better human beings. I don't know. Maybe it's fine. I have a pessimistic anthropology, mind you.

Thomas: I understand, of course. And surely, if we do nothing, will be the default outcome. But let us keep in mind that we humans have the capacity and the opportunity to behave in different ways. I mean, we are complex beings with different contrasting and conflicting values. It depends very much on how you present your case, and who says what, and who sets an example. And things have

changed for the better in the past. Think about the end of slavery, the end of colonialism, women's voting rights. Just a hundred years ago, many men in European countries felt that women were not fit to vote because they were too irrational. And then, after about 10, 15 years, it was perfectly normal. So things have changed quite rapidly and often in positive ways. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead said that we never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.

And when it comes to global inequality, and the environment and the climate, there has also been change, at least in the way we talk about it, in the last decade or so. I wouldn't entirely exclude the possibility that we could use this in a positive way. You know, I wrote a book many years ago with a biologist friend of mine on selfishness (Eriksen and Hessen 1999). And the question we raised at the beginning was: is it inherently human to be selfish, or is it not? We soon came to realize that the question was wrongly phrased. It's the wrong question to ask because there isn't a yes or no answer. It depends on the circumstances. It depends on what I call the semiotic scaffolding around us, the kind of input you get from your surroundings, what makes us all ecological beings occupying niches in a vast system of communication and exchange. That, to me, is a beautiful thought.

Does This Overheated World Make People Happier?

Thomas: Yes, we were talking about possibilities, but I think you know that this is really speculation, and therefore we cannot really give an answer to what I asked because there is no answer to that. Just as I said the question of selfishness was wrongly expressed because it depends on the circumstances. Similarly, when people say that after the pandemic things will be such and such, you know, we can't take them seriously, since there's no way we can predict something as complex as the future. But I guess I don't share your pessimism about the way that, for there to be profound changes, people have to feel that something really important is at stake. And, as Emile Durkheim told us over a century ago, it is easy to give us new rights and privileges making life easier and in many ways better. But it's much harder to take those rights away from us afterwards. So the question then is – and maybe we can return to it later – does this overheated world with its economic growth, with its phenomenal material affluence and abundance, does it make people happier? What is to be lost and what can we gain from a different life which is not based on consumption, competition, the hamster wheel and destroying the world? Increased consumption is not a recipe for happiness. Or could we think differently about the good life? I think that, since we have had this breathing space since March last year, we could think seriously about what it is that creates a good and just society.

Martina: .. the pandemic has shown us all these issues, but there is another thing I just want to ask you about the overheating approach, and the fact that you are an ecological thinker. I see that there is a sort of stronger coherence between that ecological comprehension and the methodological instruments ... how are you

able to maintain this strong coherence from the comprehension on the epistemological level and the methodological level?

Thomas: Good question. Epistemologically, my view is and has always been that the smallest entity we study in the social sciences is not the individual, but a relationship between two. When we talk about ethnicity, it is always relational. Ethnic identity is always defined in relation to something which it is not. So in this sense, you could say that the only thing that exists in the world are differences. I mean, otherwise, nothing would have existed. You would have total entropy, to use the language of thermodynamics. Everything would have been the same. So the only phenomena that exist are distinctions, differences and relationships, and what these relationships set into motion. What you get is a process, a situation perhaps, where you negotiate things. We were just talking about the handshake. Should I shake his hand or shouldn't I? I met a lot of people – some I know, and some people I don't know – at the University of Copenhagen recently, and I noticed that all of us were a little bit wary. Should I shake hands because we're allowed to? Maybe it's risky. Hugs were out of the question before we'd had a couple of glasses of wine. And about half of us did shake hands, and the other half didn't. So we're socially uncertain now. This reminds us that there's very little of us that is absolute in itself. It has to be released through some kind of interaction. When you have a relationship and you have a process, then you get this sort of dynamic system of varying degrees of complexity. And how do we study this methodologically? Well, I think, for me the ideal way of going about it is to be with people in natural situations. That's the classic anthropological methodology of ethnography. But at the same time, we have to do interviews, and we have to have conversations. But when we have these conversations, we try to map out the sort of relationships that people have with the outside world. What is it that matters to you? Who are the most important people in your life? Can you tell me something about your childhood? Whatever. So we try to get to know people. And when you get to know people, you realize that they are all about their relationships with others. So the individualist fiction that we are somehow autonomous creatures that end at our skin, I could never take that view seriously because it's not the way I function. It's not the way anybody functions, really.

Metaphysics of Absence

Martina: Coming back to the pandemic, and to close our conversation on the issue, 1 day I read something on what you call the “metaphysics of absence”, through which you become aware of the importance of just being in the same room with other people you don't even know. Meetings have become much more efficient, but much less pleasant, and probably less rewarding in all kinds of ways because we don't get to know people. And online meetings are fine, but we don't have memories of them.

Thomas: No, that is correct, simply because you get your memories with your entire body. A few months ago I was at a conference in Lisbon. Of course, I didn't go. I mean, I was at home. I gave my talk, and there was a discussion, and then I

turned off the computer and went downstairs to cook dinner. You know, had I been in Lisbon, it would have taken a long time. It would have been expensive. It would have been bad for the environment. But still we continue to do this because we know how important it is to sit and drink coffee with people, go for a walk afterwards, smell the atmosphere, eat food, marvel at the beauty of a city like Lisbon and the *bacalhau* (cod) you get with your *vinho verde* – all these things matter because we learn and remember with our bodies. We have probably all become more aware of the need to be in place physically. In this way, the pandemic has been a magnifying glass, and one of the things it has made visible is something that the sociologist Anthony Giddens spoke about many years ago as “presence-availability”, which I think is a good term – you know, being available for others physically. We came to realize that it was becoming a scarce resource. But the other thing that I wanted to emphasize about the pandemic is that it’s not just a magnifying glass. It’s also a catalyst, because it has accelerated tendencies that were already there, especially in the realm of digitalization. I think Netflix did reasonably well in 2020, to put it that way, compared to United Airlines. I think this is something we could hopefully learn from this accelerated digitalization when we look back, that we need friction, resistance and scarcity. I have scarcity of information in mind, but also a scarcity of works of art or entertainment such as films and music. In the past there was a slower rhythm, and you had to wait for the goodies, whether it was a new recording or a new movie, and you often had to order a book – I got mine from a bookshop in Cambridge – and it took a while before it arrived. With other people, you sent a letter and maybe you got a response after 3 weeks.

Martina: Digital platforms are now part of our everyday life, but at the same time a clear and shared definition of them is complicated. In fact, they appear as complex black boxes, where inputs and outputs are visible, but processes are inscrutable. Certainly, what you highlight is that the acceleration in the platformization of our life can be an opportunity to live (reasonably) in a better way and we’ll talk about it in a next conversation.

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Chapter 2

The Double Bind of Climate Change in Contemporary World Society



Abstract At the time of the classical sociologists, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the most visible contradiction of society was that between labour and capital. To early anthropologists, a few decades later, the main contradiction was the clash of cultures resulting from colonialism and unequal power, where non-state, non-modern cultures seemed doomed to vanish. To us, the most poignant and urgent contradiction of global modernity is climate change in all its ramifications, from calls for climate justice to critiques of the growth economy. The loss of cultural diversity and oppression under capitalism have not gone away, but a new and fresh layer has been added, and this is what this conversation is about.

Martina: Today we're going to talk about climate change and the overheating approach here in order to discuss questions about how overheating approach could be presented to offer an alternative to capitalism. This is because I read a lot of your articles about climate change that analyze a lot of problems, but not how the approach could present an alternative way to dealing with this contradiction within capitalism itself.

Thomas: Well, yeah, that's obviously a huge question, and it's a complex one. So why don't we start with overheating and climate change? Then we could move on to capitalism.

Martina: Ok, fine. It's just that capitalism is really connected with climate change, isn't it?

Thomas: Yes, absolutely, global environmental destruction is deeply embedded in the growth economy and global inequality, and there may be good reasons for talking about the Capitalocene instead of the Anthropocene. But let's start with a more modest general observation, namely the fact that climate change has only entered the general intellectual debate in a major way only in the last decade or so. It was less mainstream just over 10 years ago! Yes, there have been warnings, not least from within the UN system and from scientists, about global warming since the early 1990s. Besides, there were people who were worried about the environment in the 1960s and 1970s as well, about pollution and acid rain, and that kind of thing. I took part in environmentalist demonstrations myself as a teenager. But the drama of global climate change has seeped into the mainstream of public discourse, politics

and not least research in just the last 10–15 years. It is probably not a majority, but a very large number of social science projects at a certain scale contain this element by now. Not that it's necessarily the main element, but it's become a part of the general framework of thinking about society, whether you study migration, global inequality or the European middle classes. It is an intellectual revolution comparable to that in the 1970s, when it became necessary to include a gender dimension in your research in order to be taken seriously. Gender had been strangely invisible in most of social research, both in sociology and anthropology, and at a certain point, it became necessary to deal with that, owing to the rise of feminism in politics and the academy. So, gender issues become massively present in the collective mind of the global middle classes. The same is now happening with climate and, I would add, biodiversity. Only the other day, I had a conversation with an old friend of mine who's a novelist – Jostein Gaarder – who wrote a global bestselling novel about the history of philosophy called *Sophie's World* (Gaarder, *Sophie's world: A novel about the history of philosophy*, 1994). As he pointed out, when he wrote that book in the early 1990s, he didn't mention climate and the environment at all. There was about the environment. And, as he points out, today it would have been unthinkable not to include it in one way or another. What does Aristotle say about nature? And Spinoza and Rousseau, and – not to forget – Descartes? There are so many relevant philosophers who could have been engaged in a discussion about nature. Today, Gaarder would have taken a more ecological approach. I had a similar experience myself since I wrote a textbook in social anthropology called *Small Places, Large Issues* back in the early 1990s (Eriksen, *Small places, large issues: An introduction to social and cultural anthropology*, 1995). It's been translated into more than 20 languages, and I have revised it several times, but until recently without including the anthropology of climate change in a serious way. Earlier this year, in February, I looked at it, thinking that if this book is going to be able to survive as a useful teaching text for another few years, it really has to be seriously rewritten. There were a number of things I needed to do, apart from the usual editing and updating. One was digitalization, which is one of the big changes which is now everywhere. You cannot seriously write about contemporary culture anywhere, whether in Padova or Kampala, without mentioning the Internet, apps or smartphones. The digital world now enters nearly every chapter, since it is part of the air that we breathe in the 2020s. It pervades our lives, which it didn't in 2010 or even 2013. It does not work in the same way everywhere, but that just makes the issue even more interesting from a comparative anthropological perspective.

Finding Ourselves at a Crossroads

And then there is the other even bigger and more frightening topic, nature and climate change. In the latest, fifth edition, published in summer 2023, there is a new chapter on the anthropology of climate change, and I also had to rewrite most of the bits about environmental anthropology and the humanity–nature relationship. I'm

mentioning this just to point out that this family of issues has come onto the agenda in new ways and requires a reconceptualization of much of the social theory that forms the basis of both anthropology and sociology. The concept of the Anthropocene has entered everyday language, and many of us now have some idea about what it implies, namely that we human beings have been really efficient since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in not only transforming our surroundings, but even the very geology of the planet since, as is often pointed out, the concept of the Anthropocene was devised by geologists, by the natural scientists Crutzen and Stoermer.

The changes we now inflict on the planet will leave traces for our distant descendants to see in the crust of the Earth, as an indication of escalating overheating effects well beyond human control. In my analysis, the image of the thermostat is important. We have a global system with no inbuilt brakes. There is nothing of that which we think of in cybernetics as a governor, a mechanism that ensures that the system does not overheat. So, if you have a heater in your room, an inbuilt thermostat, which makes sure that it doesn't get too hot. The global system, seen as a whole, is anarchic. It is driven by the market, and there are no institutions that can regulate the situation and ensure sustainability. Perhaps this could partly explain the general failure of climate negotiations: There are regular summit meetings – the annual COP meetings foremost among them – and they are well-intentioned, but very little has come out of them so far. This has something to do with the relationship between the logic of the state and the logic of the market, with the market taking the upper hand, or simply the fact that there is a close collaborative relationship between governments and corporations.

The market usually wins, and weak politicians blame it since they are afraid to take decisions that could be unpopular or expensive. I live in a country that produces oil and gas and even has decided to expand its operations, claiming that their fossil fuels are more sustainable than others'. This is at a stretch a partial truth; actually, it's rubbish. It's impossible to produce climate-neutral fossil fuels, especially when you have to drill for them out in the ocean. Saudi oil is more sustainable. Yet, sanctimonious governments continue to pretend that this particular oil is so sustainable that it would actually be immoral for us not to sell it to the world. There is a real need to slow down and cool down, and it is urgent.

Nobody in their right mind disagrees in principle. When the third and final section of the most recent intergovernmental report on climate change was published in April 2022, António Guterres took no prisoners in his summary of its implications. The report documents 'a litany of broken climate promises' and 'a file of shame cataloguing empty pledges', referring to the contradiction between politicians' speeches and their inaction. Guterres accused them of lying and pointed to countries increasing their production of fossil fuels as the 'truly dangerous radicals' rather than environmental activists demonstrating to bring extraction to an end. And he's no wild-eyed utopian green anarchist, but the General Secretary of the United Nations!

Many have been hoping that the pandemic could indirectly teach us something about how to deal with climate change, and I am one of them. The sudden, dramatic, global lockdowns showed that it is perfectly possible for governments to implement

dramatic changes if there is an urgent need to do so. Although they often blame everything on the market, politicians still have real power. The lockdowns and restrictions showed that we can change our lives overnight and still survive. Of course, people complained, but worldwide, most tried to make the most of their radically changed life situation. For many of us, as I mentioned earlier, the toughest change to deal with consisted in social isolation, which – incidentally – is not going to happen with respect to climate change. There is a certain hope, still, that the pandemic will remind people, especially the big consumers of the global middle and upper classes, that what matters most in life is free and climate neutral. Perhaps a long-term effect of the pandemic will be a change in patterns of consumption; that millions will consume less, buy fewer unnecessary items clothes, travel less, eat more sensibly. We can do this, as the pandemic shows, and we are quite easy to convince if our neighbours do the same thing. And if the state comes in and says, “Look, you’ve got to do this because otherwise things are going to be catastrophic,” people might comply, especially if their experience tells them that the alternative is unpleasant and deadly. Of course, by then it may be too late.

Another point I’d like to make is that the Covid pandemic has shown beyond doubt that civil society, NGOs and governments can regulate society, but the market will not do so, as economic anthropologists have showed for a century. The market is fine for the production and exchange of goods and services, but it is completely inadequate when it comes to dealing with crises. By the way, I notice that in your study, you have a bust of Durkheim on the shelf behind you, and nothing could have been more appropriate. More than a century ago, he told us essential things about market and society. Societal integration can come from below, from the community level. Or it can come from above, through a government with the required legitimacy. People need to have at least some trust in the state, that central government is doing something that is necessary, and you’ve got to understand that society is a collective and not just a haphazard collection of free individuals. As a result, even neoliberalists didn’t complain much when the state introduced face masks as mandatory. And when people were prevented from travelling? Few complained about it, even the airlines reluctantly accepted the lockdown. Perhaps we could imagine comparable policies now, amidst the global climate crisis.

The final thing I wanted to say, before we move on to capitalism, is that we have to take responsibility for living at this particular juncture in history. We’re living in denial in the sense that we, you and I, have grown up in a world where there have been steady improvements in terms of life expectancy, health and opportunities. We should be grateful for the benefits of modernity. Since the fossil fuel revolution, life expectancy worldwide has doubled, from around 35 to 70 years. That is something to celebrate. But at the same time, there are many naïve optimists who only see progress and growth while they should have seen the limits of growth simultaneously, yet a flickering candle of hope is absolutely necessary as we are entering a time of darkness. One influential, optimistic perspective on the contemporary condition which I approve of, even if I disagree, is represented in Hans Rosling’s book *Factfulness* (Rosling et al., 2017), which was completed by his son and daughter-in-law after his death in 2017. The selling point of that book is his argument, and

statistics, showing that the world is actually a far better place than worried people believe. His message is that there is far too much fatalism and pessimism, he says; it is a common view that everything is going down the drain, and we need to make the world a better place. Rosling shows that real advances are being made in areas such as nutrition, global health and so on. In India, several hundred million households now have piped water. They have better hygienic facilities. Life expectancy has improved even in poor and desolate countries. So many of these indicators seem to suggest that the project of infinite progress continues.

Yet, on the other hand, it is also sometimes necessary to consider the possibility that we are standing on the edge of a cliff, and are about to take a long step forward ... There seem to have been real improvements in living conditions across the planet so far by the standards of capitalism and modernity. Progress, growth and development lead to prosperity and improved well-being. We could stop for a moment and think about contemporary China and how, after the demonstrations on Tiananmen Square in 1989, there was a tacit agreement between the Chinese Communist Party and civil society that the party would guarantee economic growth if people could just leave their demands for democratic rights to one side and be loyal. Things would get better. Indeed, after Tiananmen Square, there have been no major protests in China, while the material standard of living has risen meteorically. Of course, this comes at a cost, such as ruining the environment and upsetting climate, and refusing minorities such as the Uighurs of Xinjiang autonomy. Harmony is a key value in Eastern philosophy and religion. What I'm saying is that so far, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that capitalism, modernity and industrialism have led to greater prosperity, at least if we gloss over the legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Capitalism does produce inequality, dependence and poverty. But mainly it has made life better for the majority. In the short term.

We now live at a moment when we find ourselves at a crossroads. We've painted ourselves into a corner because, in order to enjoy our wonderful lives of increased prosperity and freedom, we are forced to undermine the very conditions of those lives. It is a Faustian pact. This is where we find the fundamental contradiction, the double bind of the ideology of progress. This is where capitalism comes in, especially we could call fast capitalism, mainly financial capitalism. Until the crises of the early twenty-first century, many economists actually believed that growth could continue indefinitely. It is a beautiful, soothing, comforting story. To many people, the belief in progress replaced religion as a source of hope, especially during the twentieth century. Religion lost much of its persuasive power among the affluent classes in the Global North, and in its stead came consumerism. Certainly, in many parts of the world, people still go to church, the mosque, the synagogue or the temple, and as a political force, religion remains important as a rallying point. Yet, I would argue that in a situation where the otherworldly becomes less attractive than progressing and improving your conditions in this life, organized religion will tend to be of decreasing importance in everyday life. There are exceptions, such as the United States where millions still believe in versions of Christianity which seem outlandish to Christians elsewhere, but even there, secularism has been gaining ground for a long time, and there, even religion has been commercialised and turned

into a commodity that Americans consume like they consume other goods and services. The story about progress as a source a meaning in life presupposes that things will get better in this world; you don't have to wait for 'pie in the sky when you die'. Yet, at this historical moment, that story is no longer functioning. In the absence of strong organized religious beliefs and a collective faith in technological progress, a void appears, a liminal space between the ideology and practice of progress and something else. The growth ideology. But what are we going to do next? This is where we need to liberate our intellectual and political imagination. This is also where we're going to need creative sociologists and anthropologists who can come up with alternatives.

The Role of Governments in Climate Summit Meetings

Martina: Yes, but the funny thing is that it is impossible to construct a general analysis of this situation. Our disciplines seem so fragmented, and in these days we can see how difficult it could be to find a common starting point. What do you think about COP26? ¹

Thomas: The problems encountered during the negotiations were perfectly understandable, and they keep repeating themselves. There are many things that could be said about it, but it was very understandable that India could not sign an agreement to phase out coal in the near future. The Indian delegation spoke about phasing out coal in a controlled fashion instead. Owing to the fundamental injustice regarding the distribution of burdens and benefits in this realm, resistance from countries in the South is almost inevitable. It is not very convincing to talk about a global climate policy without also addressing climate justice. Why is it that poor people should always be asked to foot the bill? In a large country like India, where there is still a great deal of poverty and a great number of people who need more energy than they currently have at their disposal, making the sacrifices does not seem fair if all they wish for is a light bulb, a charging outlet and perhaps a small fridge. A typical Californian fridge uses more energy than an average African, but it is the African who loses their livelihood due to drought or flooding. Colonialism keeps repeating itself.

The transition is not going to be easy. We are going to need a lot of energy in the foreseeable future, just to feed humanity and, up here in Scandinavia, to stay warm. In India, coal is the most accessible source of energy. So, for now the Indian reaction is perfectly understandable, especially when rich countries like Norway, which

¹The reference is to the United Nations Climate Change Conference 2021, also known as COP26, was the XXVIth United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, scheduled in Glasgow from October 31 to November 12, 2021, under the chairmanship of the United Kingdom. It was followed up by COP27 in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, in November 2022.

would have managed perfectly well without producing fossil fuels, continue to produce fossil fuels and expand production as if nothing had happened.

For a long time, governments and NGOs have proposed, not least at the annual COP conferences, different models for regulating energy use among different countries in the world. One has been that everybody should pay an equal tax for emitting carbon dioxide; emissions in one country equals emissions in another country. Another, superior model, takes global inequality as its point of departure, both in terms of historical and contemporary emissions, by speaking about climate justice and not just climate change mitigation as if it were an equally distributed global responsibility. A practice introduced some years ago, as you know, was that of carbon trade, where rich countries can buy the right to pollute more from poor countries. A more interesting possibility could be a progressive taxation system, where every country has a quota. If it is exceeded, they have to pay into a global climate fund. But if you use less than your allotted quota, you can similarly receive money. In this sense, it can pay to be sustainable. This means that countries like Niger and Botswana would actually do quite well because they would receive money from that fund that Italy and Norway would have to pay into. This kind of practice would be a step towards greater climate justice. We should not be allowed to forget that the main culprits are rarely the most affected victims. Only in a few cases do these roles converge, and this is the main reason that I decided to do fieldwork in Australia some years ago. That country is simultaneously one of the main culprits and one of the main victims of climate change, and I was interested in exploring how they dealt with that paradox.

Having said this, I am not very optimistic about the outcome of the climate summit meetings. It's important that people come together, but looking at the politicians in my own country, some of whom I know personally, I know that they are earnest, well-intentioned, hard-working people. And yet, the conviction that we should be able to reach the climate goals by 2040 is a result of magical thinking. All major indicators still point in the wrong direction.

Climate Change and Environmental Destruction as a Double Bind

Martina: Yes. Did you ever see new hope in the new climate movement, the new climate regeneration movement? What do you think about that? The literature tells us that various and disparate articles are coming out on this issue (see for example Thiery et al., [2021](#) or Faist, [2018](#)).

Thomas: There is some promise in the new youth movement, but there is also a need for caution. We could learn from history here. In the 1970s, there were also many ecologically minded students who were critical of growth capitalism and preached the virtues of a simpler life, but it turned out that global capitalism was perfectly capable of absorbing a lot of little countercultural movements without

actually changing its direction. What is new is that corporate leaders and politicians are no longer rude and dismissive, but polite and understanding when they meet representatives of the climate movement, but this reaction does have a certain air of repressive tolerance. It is easy to tolerate radical views, giving the impression that they are taken seriously, before just going on with business as usual.

It is also a fact that climate change, and environmental destruction in general, represents a double bind: You cannot easily reduce energy use without plunging millions into misery, but you cannot continue in the present manner without destroying the planet for our descendants. And we cannot look to politicians for the good alternatives. Probably, it is in civil society that the germs of change are being sown. A famous quotation attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead said that we should never underestimate the power of a small group of committed people to change the world. In fact, it is the only thing that ever has. Unfortunately, it is impossible to find a source for that viral bon-mot, and it is probably false. But the essence is right.

Something interesting has happened to politics and political divides in the world since the 1970s and the early countercultural, ecological movements though. For many years, politics was mainly about class and inequality. I remember reading a book many years ago by your countryman, the philosopher Norberto Bobbio, called *Destra e sinistra* (Bobbio, 1994), which argued that left and right still made sense in politics because of enduring inequality. This is true, but new layers have been put on top of this basic tension. Identity is one, which cuts across the conventional left–right divide, and to many of those who are engaged in identity politics, belonging to a group – a nation, a religious group etc. – is more important than class identity and more worth fighting for. In several countries, the French expression *les extrêmes se touchent* – the extremes meet – is confirmed when extreme right and extreme left are united in their resistance to globalization and their glorification of the local and often the national.

The new perspective which is now entering the political mainstream, and which is the focus of this conversation, is the global climate issue, which also transcends the traditional left–right divide. In this field, identity and climate sometimes converge, as in the youth climate movement. Greta Thunberg and her supporters have their young age in common – a shared identity – and a common cause in reducing carbon footprint for the sake of the planet and our descendants. As a youth researcher, you are familiar with some of these mechanisms yourself. If you think of the babyboomer generation and their younger siblings like myself, we have led our lives in a world where the progress paradigm was totally hegemonic, and we have invested a lot in it, willingly or not – our educations, our jobs, our mortgages, our cars and so on. We have a lot to lose by just leaving the progress paradigm behind. With young people, it is different. Precisely because of their youth, they have invested far less into the existing system than my generation, they have less to lose and can more easily imagine a radically different life. The downside is that they lack experience and often historical knowledge. Their world is framed by the here and now, the tyranny of the moment, to a greater extent than those of us who have been around for some time.

So, clearly, generational identity has something to do with this engagement. But then you have the fact that there is a polarization where people are actively making an effort to not listen to each other. When Greta Thunberg described the rhetoric of politicians dismissively in her famous ‘Blah, blah, blah’ speech, she hit the nail on the head. At the same time, she underestimates the complexity of the matter, which can partly be put down to her youth. She misread one of the chief objectives of the language of politics, which is about finding a common ground. It is slow, compromise-based, and you have to express yourself in a diplomatic and cautious way. It is also true that speeches from elite persons like António Guterres do not change things in themselves, but they could lead to shifting the discourse in a particular direction, and this could eventually lead to changes afterwards. Snowball effects exist, as do tipping points. In other words, there are still reasons to support summit meetings in spite of the amount of ‘blah, blah, blah’ emerging from them. Just getting people from Bolivia, Nepal and Japan together for a discussion about the state of the world is valuable, even if we shouldn’t be overambitious about the actual outcome. The second unfortunate effect of the Thunberg rhetoric is the way in which it leads to contempt against politicians and could ultimately justify anti-democratic sentiment. By all means, people do have the right to be impatient, but we need leadership both from below and from above.

It is also a sad fact that many world leaders seem to be more radical in their climate ambitions than the majority of people who do not belong to elites. There now exist green parties in lots of countries around the world. In Germany, which has the oldest and most established such party, it may get 14% of the vote on a good day, as they did in the federal elections in 2021. In other countries, green parties typically languish in what we in Norway speak of as ‘the valley of shadows’. There is a real challenge for democracy if, in a country with free and fair elections, the vast majority votes for parties in cahoots with the fossil fuel industry. The small-scale and short-term is given the pride of place at the expense of the global and long-term. As a result of pent-up frustration, there are some perceptible anti-democratic sentiments in the green movement. Have you read the story about the Unabomber? He was a terrorist who sent mail bombs, tried to blow up airplanes and blackmailed newspapers into printing long treatises that he had written about how we were ruining the planet and how something really had to change very fast. The Unabomber, whose real name was Ted Kaczynski, was a green fundamentalist and a terrorist, responsible for three casualties and more than 20 injuries. In the end, the federal police found him in a cabin in Montana, and it turned out that he had been a professor of mathematics. This was in 1995, 17 years after he had started his violent campaign for a greener and more sustainable world. His analysis had uncanny resemblances to those that we find in parts of the green movement, namely that the politicians are not going to do anything and that time is scarce. They’re not going to listen lest we force them to, and since change is urgently needed, we have to force them. This is obviously a dangerous path to pursue, although civil disobedience may be effective in some situations. We need to find other means ways of making that shift in the green direction. My suggestion is to look at civil society organizations, anything from the Red Cross to small anti-racist networks. Hope is essential. It is disconcerting to see

young people who are reluctant to have children because they believe that Armageddon is just around the corner.

Martina: Yes, it is a rising phenomeon, especially in Italy, that we have a problem of a demographic decline. . . .

Thomas: Yes, this is happening. And that's interesting, isn't it? The flattening out and reduction of population in many countries represents the opposite of the fears of overpopulation that have been with us since Malthus wrote *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1898). The demographic change you mention represents a reversal of the demographic overheating that has been predicted for two centuries, ever since the birth of population statistics! But just to comment on what you said about young people, yes, there are young people who have a deep engagement for climate and the environment, and who are reluctant to have children because they feel that it is irresponsible given the dismal state of the world. This is too grim. I sometimes give talks and lectures to young people on these issues, and I always make a point of ending the talk by reminding them not to forget to enjoy life!

Habitus and Reflexivity

Martina: Absolutely. And I agree with you. It seems to me that you have a rigid vision of habits, as well as also a creative side, a reflexive side. So I hope we can change things that if we have a lot of problems in terms of how to create our world, the inner habit, the habit is resistant to change or not. What do you think?

Thomas: Speaking of habitus, it is defined by Bourdieu (1977) as enduring dispositions for action. It is embodied and often subconscious and nonverbal; it is about that which goes without saying because it comes without saying. Habitus has been associated with Bourdieu in recent decades, but the ancient Greeks also wrote about it as a kind of embodied, incorporated knowledge. Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss also wrote about habitus. It's about learning with your body, not just mind. You might say habits, as in habitus, are sticky and difficult to get rid of. I have turned 60, but I still write in the same knotty and barely legible handwriting that I developed as a child. I throw a ball in exactly in the same way, clean the dishes just as I did when growing up, and so on. This embodied, stubborn knowledge of habits gives us an anchoring and security, but it can also make it difficult to change your everyday life. It is important to think about these things because so many of our unreflected habits are not sustainable. And – to return to the climate youth – the older you get, the more difficult it becomes to change your habits radically. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks they say; well, you can, but it has to be done in the right way, and the difficulty should not be underestimated. Our habits are changing in my household. I don't know about you, but in my house, we eat less meat than we used to just a few years ago. We still eat a bit of meat, but less than before, and it seems as if the juicy Saturday steak dinner is gone, never to return. This change has taken place gradually without any conscious decision, since the culture is changing in that direction and we know a lot more about carbon footprint and animal welfare than

we used to. That's an example of how habits may change almost unconsciously, but of course, some habits can change quickly, and others take much, much longer, just as with cultural change in general. Some parts of a culture change really fast, such as the introduction of new consumer technology, from dishwashers to smartphones. Anything that makes life more frictionless and more comfortable by removing resistance is as easy to introduce to us as giving us free candy. As early as 1895, Durkheim was among the first to point out what may seem obvious, namely, that giving people new opportunities and rights is easy, but the moment you've done it, taking them away is almost certain to lead to resistance (Durkheim, 1982).

The new information technologies, in particular, are fabulous lubricants for global neoliberalism. They promise a smoother, more efficient, easier and more frictionless life, and it's been so easy to introduce them worldwide that people's lives have been transformed quite a bit without us even having noticed. I was thinking about this the other day when I was taking the airport bus. What if I had left my mobile phone at home? What would have happened then? Many problems would immediately have presented themselves. My bus ticket, my plane ticket, my vaccination certificate, my lifeline to people both away and at home; in brief, I would have been quite helpless, feeling intensely vulnerable. That kind of habit can be changed easily in one direction, but it is more difficult to reverse. Whereas other habits change far more slowly. Just as other parts of the culture change much, much more slowly, such as the kinship system, etiquette and traditional foods. Since your question is about habit and habitus, changing your habits need not make life easier if you lose affordances to which you have become accustomed. Perhaps we should advertize the virtues of resistance and scarcity? If you get everything at once, it loses value. Sometimes, less is more. Certainly, this is the case if we are talking about policy and practice in relation to climate change.

Martina: Yes, because we are like fish in the water.

Thomas: Yes, exactly, swimming happily around, but totally oblivious of the existence of water. Until someone fishes us out of it. At that point we instantly develop a very powerful interest in water. The question is whether this is what is happening now with respect to climate and the environment. We gasp for water and realize its value for the first time. We have stumbled backwards into a world where we are vulnerable, dependent on each other and locked onto a destructive path. It is time to move on.

Martina: Would you say that the elephant in the room is the idea of progress, or can we just say capitalism?

Thomas: Thank you for bringing that theme back in, Martina. As always, we have to think dialectically not just about history, but about almost everything. There is a duality in capitalism that we need to understand in order to grasp how difficult it is going to be to divest ourselves of this hugely successful economic system. Historically, industrial capitalism has been a blessing and a curse. Marx may have been the first to fully understand how it simultaneously unleashed productive forces leading to human progress and created a world callously exploiting people and draining the world of its accumulated wealth. He predicted, as a card-carrying member of the evolutionist club dominating intellectual life in his time, that the system would

eventually be superseded by something more just and humane. This did not come about. To the extent that capitalism was dethroned in the following century, it was replaced by more oppressive social systems with no ecological sensitivity whatsoever. The most successful story from this period is arguably the growth of the welfare state and mixed economies based on compromises between state and market.

When we now need to propose alternatives to capitalism and its associated ideas of progress, it is for reasons other than those articulated in Marxism. Sure, inequality remains a global problem, and working conditions bordering on slavery are widespread in some parts of the world, but capitalism has proved more flexible, and more popular among ordinary working people, than what seemed likely to left-wing Victorians like Marx and Engels. On a planetary level, things seem to be going rather well for the time being.² Not for everybody, but for many. The global middle classes are swelling. Life expectancy has almost doubled; nutrition, sanitation, entertainment options and life opportunities in general have improved and not just in the wealthy countries. People have more leisure time, fewer go hungry to bed, child labour and child mortality have declined. Through electronic media, we are connected in ways which were unimaginable just a few decades ago. These and other developments have taken place in, and courtesy of, the capitalist economic system presided over by governments and international agreements.

So, as I started to say during this conversation, the main problem of capitalism in the Anthropocene does not consist in its cruelty to people, its creation of hierarchies and wealth disparities or its production of misery on a large scale. To be honest, on these and other criteria it performs better than its alternatives, such as feudalism, theocracy or state socialism. The problem lies in its being inherently and necessarily destructive by basing its existence and flourishing on economic growth as a necessity and the availability of cheap energy as fuel for its engines.

It can be argued, and I'm inclined to do so, that it was the marriage of the steam engine with coal that marked the onset of the Anthropocene, fanned into world domination by economic practices explained and encouraged by people like David Ricardo, who showed that a comparative advantage exists when it is cheaper to produce and sell a product in location A rather than location B. To Ricardo's expansive colonial mind, the whole world was a single bazaar, if somewhat sprawling, so if it was cheaper to grow and transport sugar to Britain from Jamaica than from Indonesia, you should. The logic of the comparative advantage stimulates competition and increases efficiency in production, ultimately turning the world into a single place and its people into runners on a treadmill.

Now let's fast forward to our time. The containerization of sea transport has led to an accelerated globalization of trade through enormously reduced costs and increased efficiency. Without the container ship, the Chinese economic miracle would have been impossible. The growth in world trade has been massive, from

²This conversation took place before the upheavals of 2022, with its dramatic climate events, the Russian war on Ukraine, the cost of living crisis and destabilising forces threatening democracy in many countries.

US\$2 trillion in 1980 to US\$20 trillion in 2019. This relies on a parallel growth in the production of manufactured goods and is, at the end of the day, about consumption. It has enabled Norwegians to buy tonnes of clothing that they will wear once or twice, Africans to get online with affordable smartphones, South Americans to have more than one pair of sneakers.

But all this comes at a cost, and that is why we need to move beyond the growth economy. For two centuries, the availability of cheap and abundant energy was a blessing. It has now turned into a curse. We are undermining the very conditions of our existence by bringing plants and animals into extinction, filling the oceans with plastic waste, razing rainforests for soya and scrublands for mining, eating more than our fill of beef and chicken – more than 60 billion birds a year – flying on weekend trips to fight boredom, watching Netflix for similar reasons, and innumerable other comfortable, frictionless activities that make us, the global middle classes, full and complacent, but draining our planet of its life-sustaining capabilities.

This is not a problem caused by humanity as such, but by the inner logic of capitalism, which demands expansion, growth and the extraction of anything that can be valued in euros or dollars, whether it is human labour or human leisure, biotopes that can be converted into productive sites, that can generate wealth for the fictitious owners, whose right it has never been to own the future of other living creatures, human or not. This is why the term Capitalocene can be more accurate than Anthropocene in some contexts.

The truth is that our wealth, our growth, our prosperity and the by now vast number of lives worth living, a fact often mentioned as proof that we are on the right track, rely on destruction of ecosystems and futures. The facts are undeniable. Insects dying, dead whales filled with plastic left to rot on beaches, burning rainforests, the loss of 60% of the world's wild mammals since 1970 – the coalmine is chirping with canaries. Being an optimist has become an uphill struggle, let's just admit this. Life in this century has become a matter of muddling through rather than following a path of progress.

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Chapter 3

Threats to Diversity in a Overheated World



Abstract Most of Eriksen's research over the years has somehow or other dealt with the local implications of globalization. He has looked at ethnic dynamics, the challenges of forging national identities, creolization and cosmopolitanism, the legacies of plantation societies and, more recently, climate change in the era of 'accelerated acceleration'. Here we want to talk not just about cultural diversity and not just look at biological diversity, but both, because he believes that there are some important pattern resemblances between biological and cultural diversity. And many of the same forces militate against that and threaten to create a flattened world with less diversity, less difference. And, obviously, there is a concern for the future. We need to have an open ended future with different options, maximum flexibility and the current situation with more homogenization. We live in a time when there are important events taking place, too, from climate change to environmental destruction, and we need to do something about that. In order to show options and possibilities for the future, we have to focus on diversity because complex problems need diverse answers.

Martina: I would like to start with a passion of mine to get into one of your main research themes: diversity. I'm a *Marvel* fan and, what is emerging, is a reduction of what Marvel has always been about: diversity in comics. There seems to be a standardization that reduces the specificity of each superhero and so it seems that everyone is the same in a kind of indifference of difference. So in this hyper-diversity, I think there is also a reduction of diversity. Do you see something similar in your studies as well?

Thomas: It's a great example, and it could be useful to look briefly at the history of thought about diversity and the way in which it's suddenly come onto the agenda in a huge way. If you take a look at the number of journal articles about diversity and related concepts, the result is stunning. Before 1990, the concept was not much used. In the last 30 years or so, it's positively exploded. You now find massive research on biodiversity, cultural diversity, agro-biodiversity, biocultural diversity, indigenous diversity and so on. You'll also notice that the growth curve has this 'overheating shape' indicating exponential growth in the use of the terms. And why is this? Well, I think this has something to do with what Hegel described when he said that 'the owl of Minerva flies at dusk,' which is to say that it is only when a phenomenon is being threatened or even gone that it catches widespread attention. Regarding diversity, we

may be witnessing this mechanism. The extreme interest in diversity talk since around 1990 is largely a result of its loss which became increasingly noticeable since the beginning of the overheating years in the early 1990s. So many things happened at the same time, more or less. I was just reminded yesterday of the fact that Nelson Mandela was released almost exactly a year after the fall of the Berlin Wall. There were many major events taking place, seemingly independently of each other, in different parts of the world. This has something to do with what you're talking about, because yes, I think you're right, there has been a reduction of many kinds of diversity.

So when we speak of *superdiversity*, which we do sometimes in migration studies (Vertovec, 2023), we're really mainly talking about people who are diverse in the same ways, or rather people who are diverse in compatible ways. They all fit into the template of modernity. So the big paradox here of identity politics is that it expresses similarity more than difference. It's not really about cultural difference because they rely on a shared language for talking about cultural difference. So in other words, in order to show how different you are from everybody else, you first have to become quite similar. Otherwise, there is a real risk that we'd end up like Ludwig Wittgenstein's lion. In *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein, 1983), he remarks that if a lion could talk, we wouldn't understand what it was saying. Lévi-Strauss actually says something similar in *Tristes Tropiques* (Lévi-Strauss, 1976) where he describes meeting an Amazonian people, I think it was the Nambikwara, who are so close that he could touch them, and yet it is as though there were a glass wall between them. That's real diversity. It's different in a way that makes translation difficult. And it's another world. It's a different ontology.

These days, I'm reading a book by Leslie Bank and Nellie Sharpley about the Coronavirus pandemic in South Africa (Bank & Sharpley, 2022), and there are rural communities in the Eastern Cape which don't trust biomedicine, so many refuse vaccinations. They resist it. They don't trust it. Perhaps they trust traditional remedies slightly more. This was and is the situation with HIV-AIDS as well. This is a kind of diversity which is understandable and translateable, yet fundamental. You know, there are really different ways in which we see the Cosmos and the universe. So if you take the Marvel films, they've really sort of renovated and renewed the superhero phenomenon, which was almost dead when they began to revive it. As a kid around 1970, I was an avid reader of Superman and Batman. I also read a lot of Donald Duck and incidentally, a passion for *i paperi* and the Donald/Paperino universe is one curious commonality between Italy and Norway. Anyway, with the superheroes, everybody was very white. They represented a the white, conservative version of America. In the renewed Marvel universe, there are lots of literally very strong women, who are independent agents and not just pretty appendages to the men as they had often been in the past. You also had people with different cultural and racial identities. The Black Panther of Wakanda and all the mythology which went with it are very popular in many African countries. It's huge in Nigeria, for example, and seems to add to the existing diversity. But then again, as we were saying and as you observed, these characters are diverse in comparable within a uniform framework, a pretty rigid cultural grammar which presupposes

individualism: there are no very deep cultural differences in the way they see the world. So that's the new kind of diversity, which really consists more of talking about diversity than *being* diverse. I should add that the superdiversity perspective is very useful, and I have often drawn on it myself in research on cultural complexity. But it remains framed within the language of modernity.

Martina: What you just said makes me think of contradictory dimensions that are, however, held together by the same gaze. How is it that your approach helps hold together processes that nevertheless tell us the same thing about the concept of diversity?

Thomas: When we talk about diversity, it may be fruitful to look at it from a different angle. We could look at traditional knowledge and bodily skills among indigenous peoples, for example, and ideas about nature and the afterlife. Typically, some would immediately object that this is wrong and we are right and they should learn science and should go to school, period. But that's not the point when we approach them as scholars, because then we try to understand their worlds from within and you realize that this world is experienced and perceived in ways which are quite different from ours. One of the big debates in anthropology for a number of years now has concerned the relationship between culture and nature after Lévi-Strauss, the greatest anthropological theorist of the last century. His view was that all cultures have a clear distinction between culture and nature, which is allegedly a universal way of creating order. This view has been challenged by people who have done serious ethnographic work on the issue, from my Oslo colleague Signe Howell's work in Malaysia to studies in Melanesia, but perhaps mainly in the Amazon, where anthropologists argue that there are many ways of conceptualising the relationship between humans and everything else. Many of these world-views are quite ecological in character. They see us as participants in the same universe as other animals, plants and even rocks and rivers, and might point out that 'the land does not belong to us – we belong to the land'. That makes for a very different relationship to nature than the predatory, exploitative form typical of capitalist modernity. In other words, in these cultural worlds, there is no clear boundary between us humans and non-humans. If you go in that direction, you will discover that in fact, cultural diversity is about much more than giving rights to minorities and celebrating National Day in different ethnic costumes, or even establishing religious tolerance. That way of talking about diversity is useful, but it should not detract attention from deeper and older forms of diversity.

Will Cultural Differences Continue to Exist?

Martina: Oh yes, you've got your traditional food. We have our traditional food, you have your heritage, we've got our heritage. So in a comparison here, you can really reduce difference.

Thomas: Exactly! I sometimes cannot resist the temptation to quote the late anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who said, tongue in cheek, that cultural difference

will still exist. The French will never eat salted butter. But the good old days of widow burning and cannibalism are gone forever. One of the reasons why there has been such a growth in the literature on diversity since around 1990 and the pressure on diversity is much greater than it has been before owing to global overheating, is simply the massive reduction in deep cultural difference. I mean, there have been concerns about cultural diversity for a long time, and crudely speaking, there are still two main schools – the modernists and the relativists, you might say.

Martina: Oh, wonderful, please open a little window of a *lectio* about that. . .

Thomas: With pleasure! The modernist view, which you find in the United Nations and most development organizations, is that people should be respected for who they are, whether they are Africans, transcontinental migrants, people from all parts of the world, and yet, they should be allowed to take part in the rewards of modernity. We should give them the opportunity to go to school, to get an education, to get themselves a haircut, a pair of shoes, a movement towards the city and find themselves a good job. So that's a very sort of assimilationist kind of policy, which was very common and still is towards many minorities. It has resonances of *la mission civilisatrice* and *the white man* and *the white man's burden* of colonial times.

The opposite view, typically represented by anthropologists and indigenous activists, is also not problematic, and I have often argued against it in the past. This view, shaped by cultural relativism, is that we should allow people with a different culture to be different, just as they allow us to be whoever we are. Recognize and respect the fact that they are different, sometimes in fundamental ways. But you run into dilemmas in both cases because if you encourage people very strongly to become like yourself, that's a reduction of diversity and disrespect of their unique contribution to humanity. The result is a kind of homogeneity which obliterates and tramples on their cultural memories and cherished traditions. What you're basically telling them is that everything that they know and all the knowledge and the skills that have been passed down from your grandfather and grandmother and so on are worthless. 'Leave it all behind and join the modern world!' The promise held out is the best thing we have to offer, namely the right to become more or less like ourselves. Suppose you are a Greenlandic Inuit whose traditional way of life is fading away. Danish authorities help you to move into an apartment building with a supermarket on the ground floor, and they give you a little brochure, which explains how you can use a banana, what a banana is for, because you've never seen a banana before. You then go to school and you learn Danish history and English language. These deracinated Indigenous groups live today in some of the societies with the highest suicide rates, the highest rates of domestic violence, alcoholism and drug abuse in the world. It is true that assimilated Indigenous people generally have better health and longer life expectancy than their ancestors. They have money and wagemwork. They don't have to be cold in winter. They live in reasonably comfortable houses. But they've lost their self-respect because they've been told that everything that their people have stood for is worthless. This is one of the main problems with this policy of homogenization. But the other policy of relativism or celebration of diversity also has its problems because of its problematic relationship to scientific truths and human rights. Shouldn't human rights be universal and

overrule cultural relativism and any form of celebration of diversity? Should we tolerate cultures where children are routinely abused, where men regularly beat their wives, where only grown men have political influence and so on? Should we regard scientific knowledge as just one knowledge regime on a par with orally transmitted knowledge? The fact of their being different does not make them more virtuous than you and me. This is a difficult, but important question, and it is necessary to be aware that when the United Nations or the development industry speaks about diversity, they tend to speak of the kind of diversity that you mentioned at the beginning. It is a kind of diversity which is easy to celebrate and nurture – it is compatible with modernity. It contains handicrafts, dance, exciting food and so on – but they never talk about asymmetrical or patriarchal gender relations as a form of diversity. Right? Or even knowledge, and shouldn't they? There is an inconsistency here. On the other hand: Shouldn't people, regardless of where they were born, be allowed to take part in the wealth of scientific knowledge that has been developed painstakingly, often in Europe? So there are dilemmas with both positions. An ethical problem is, not least, with what right we are telling other people what to do and how to do it. In what position are we to do so, given our own bloody and shameful history and the way we are currently destroying the planet? Many are tired of white people telling them what to do and how to think. Be this as it may, what is clear is that there has been a reduction in diversity and that this is accelerating. We can see it, for example, in language.

Martina: Ok. Just a question in the middle, sorry, Thomas. . . from your viewpoint, using intersectionality as a methodology could be a way to read the diversity in a sense in which you can respect the diversity as a researcher.

Thomas: Yes. It would be a good place to begin. Looking at intersectionality is one way of beginning to describe complexity rather than celebrations of superficial diversity, since you look at different criteria. You don't just look at one dimension, but combine several and their relationships. However, there are other conceptual tools that can also be used for speaking about diversity. Anthropologists are fond of speaking about cosmologies, or world-views; but you can also look at kinship. Perhaps *diversity* is a bit too big to be handled easily with just two hands? It's a blanket term, which covers a lot of ground. So what kind of difference are we actually talking about? That would be one place to begin. We could be specific and begin with an example, which is never a bad thing in social theory. If you take traditional healers in rural South Africa who mistrust biomedicine, have their own ways of treating AIDS, for example. With what right can we tell them that they're wrong and on what basis? It's not easy if you if you want to take other people seriously and you want to develop sort of knowledge through a kind of dialogue and mutual respect. Of course, if their treatments do not work and ours do, that is a fairly convincing argument, but let us leave that to one side for now. So what we can do, and this is consistent with the cosmopolitan view, is this. We cannot assume that people will become just like us, that they will miraculously agree with us if we just explain our view clearly and patiently, you can't really expect that. The classic Habermasian ideal of the dialogue has clear limitations because it is restricted to communication between people who live in the same cultural world, and

world-views are not shaped by arguments, but experiences. In the last couple of years, we have see this now with the Covid pandemic, that lots of people are simply immune to a certain kind of knowledge and not interested. Their information, or knowledge, comes from other sources than mainstream science. Yet we can get our message across, and it is possible to understand each other. Each of us, in a dialogue situation, represents a certain point of view, with ethical or moral implications, but we do not have the right to force our views on other people. And I think this is where one of the big ethical challenges lies. We can understand each other, but mutual understanding does not necessarily lead to ultimate consensus.

But the point that I wanted to make is that when we talk about cultural diversity is that there really is a reduction of difference and therefore of flexibility. Now, we have to ask, is this good or is it bad? Well, it depends on who you ask. Many linguists are worried about language death because, there may be 6000 languages, m most of them very small, spoken by just a few hundred or maybe a few thousand people. Many of these languages are endangered and predicted to go extinct very soon. In Papua New Guinea, for example, many now shift from some small village language to Tok Pisin, a creolized version of English which is the national language. They also learn standard English, which is an incredibly convenient language to know if you want a job or just to communicate with the world. People in Melanesia well know that the tiny language they grew up with is not going to get them anywhere. So this is why the question of language death is quite different from the question of species extinction. Why do languages die? The short answer is because people stop speaking them, not because they are exterminated. And they may have good reasons for doing so. So who are we to condemn people to life in kind of reserve in order to keep and conserve cultural diversity? They should be entitled to choose for themselves. That may be one of the most important ethical insight here, the emphasis on autonomy for persons and communities. However, let's not paint too rosy a picture of the contemporary world. If we move beyond the realm of language, we have to consider the growth and spread of plantations, the explosive growth of mining only in the present century, of urbanization, infrastructure projects, large-scale transformations of nature which to local communities often means simply what the geographer David Harvey speaks of as accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004). People are evicted because of the new highway, the mine or the plantation. You take away whatever they have – and usually, they have no legal papers proving property rights anyway – and explain that they have to go elsewhere because we're building a highway or a shopping centre. This is the kind of situation which is very typical of overheated globalization leading to people being forced into a kind of existence that they never. People are being messed around with and they're not giving away, given the voice and nobody asks them for their opinion, so they feel overrun. So that is one reason why we should be concerned with diversity that had its to do with many things. And one of them is people's right to have a voice and to be able to take choices for themselves.

Overheating Effects and the Reduction of Diversity

Martina: Do you think the overheating approach could help to share this, this knowledge about the reduction of diversity?

Thomas: Absolutely, since we are talking about an overheating effect more than anything else. So let's speak about that, but let's also speak a bit about biodiversity, since there are so few who look at both biodiversity loss and cultural diversity loss at the same time. Yet, there are some striking similarities. When I began to look at these two parallel processes, I spoke with biologists about biodiversity. Many are deeply worried, explaining the effects of habitat loss, industrial agriculture, invasive species and so on. Foreign species often result in a less diverse world since they may outcompete endemic species. But the by far most serious cause of biodiversity loss is habitat transformation, often through the deliberate introduction of foreign species such as maize and cattle. The anxiety you find among biologists resembles the way in which some anthropologists speak about the loss of cultural diversity. So when you talk about habitat loss, for example, which is one typical cause of the loss of biodiversity, it resembles accumulation by dispossession. It affects people, and so does habitat loss. When you when you build a highway or anything involving a lot of cement, which has incidentally increased many times since 1990, many people lose their livelihood, just as the birds and animals and plants also lose their habitat. So this is very similar. But you could also say that about introduced species which were very popular for a long time. As we speak, I'm in the South African city of Stellenbosch. It was named after Simon Van der Stael, who founded it in 1679. Van der Stael ensured that it became a wine growing area and a prosperous at that, but he also planted oak trees, and the town is still nicknamed Eikestad, Oak Town. Both grapes and oaks are foreign species, and they dominate the landscape here. Grapes brought money and oaks were shady, stately and homely for the European settlers who were a long way from home. Later, trout were introduced in the Eerste River which flows through Stellenbosch, enabling European anglers to feel even more at home. Many other European species were introduced consecutively. In the nineteenth century, the American cereal maize, or corn, became a staple crop feeding millions in Southern and Eastern Africa, just as the polenta became a north Italian speciality a little earlier. The most common use of maize in Africa is by making porridge – ugali in East Africa, mealie-meal in Southern Africa. It resembles polenta, in fact. And it saves millions from starvation, while simultaneously reducing biodiversity. So there is no easy way out. And very few would get rid of all foreign species in South Africa for the sake of biodiversity. Few would go so far as to say that, no, we don't want to have grapevines here because they don't belong, or we don't want oaks since they aren't endemic. There can be no quest for a primordial purity. Quests for purity are always dangerous, and they may also infect your way of thinking about other people. If you don't want foreign species, why should you want foreign people? By the same token, neither of them 'belongs'. It's the same, the same way of framing this loss. We should be wary of this temptation.

At the same time, introduced species have led to a reduction of biodiversity in many places because they destabilize local ecosystems and may threaten local species. Australia may be the most obvious case. The successive introductions of rabbits and foxes in the nineteenth century and more recently cane toads, which I've written about in my work from Queensland, have changed the ecology and driven local species to extinction in an ecosystem which was vulnerable to begin with owing to the long isolation of Australia. So we shouldn't ignore these losses. In this context, it could be useful to speak about the Plantationocene as an alternative to the Anthropocene. It helps you focus on a certain logic of standardization. The world is in some ways becoming like a plantation. Suppose you replace a rainforest with a plantation. The number of trees may be identical, but they are all the same, while the rainforest got its identity through its internal complexity. The same goes for the people working in the plantation! They are forced into a kind of uniformity comparable to working in a McDonald's. In the plantation, there is so much which is lost, such as a great many species of trees, the intricate networks connecting insects, birds, subterranean fungal networks between the trees and so on. All this is being simplified, and species go extinct before they have even been discovered by scientists. So there's a huge process of simplification taking place for the sake of efficiency and productivity. And this is quite similar to the kind of process we also see in culture, where people are expected to be part of the monetary economy and act as fully-paid-up citizens. You pay your taxes, you stop at red traffic lights, send your children to school, and there is very little resistance against this in the national discourse. It is taken for granted that certain versions of modernity are inherently good. But at this particular moment in time – and now I'm finally going to answer your question – the overheating years since neoliberalism ensured that market mechanisms replaced collective efforts, we can easily see that there are some serious, deep contradictions in modernity to do with identity. People don't have a sense of belonging. There's a lot of alienation. Many don't feel that they have a stake in the world in which they live or a real chance to influence the conditions of their lives. Some call for strong leaders – think of India, Brazil or the USA – while others just resign. The only article of faith left in the neoliberal gospel is the belief in consumption, growth and progress. But as I've said before, in order to fulfil these promises, we have to destroy the environment. So if we want to leave this impasse, it is necessary to think differently. And I do think that the overheating approach helps us understand alienation and powerlessness, as well as, perhaps, giving us some clues as to where we can go and what we can do. I don't think small is always beautiful. Sometimes you need big things. You need a national health service to deal with a pandemic, for example. You need hospitals, you need universities, and villages do not have the resources to build hospitals or universities. You need a large scale society to do that. But we shouldn't scale up too much, since that creates a gap between the life-world and the system-world, to speak in the jargon of twentieth century social theory. And there is no inherent reason that the Kenyan school curriculum should be more or less identical to the Nepali one; so instead of speaking of education as a mantra, or an empty signifier, we could think seriously about the forms of knowledge and skills needed to navigate in particular societies.

If we could scale down whatever could be scaled down, that would give local communities more autonomy, more self-determination, and it would be a good thing for diversity and personal identity. The literature about biocultural diversity very often deals with Indigenous groups, which is fine, but with certain limitations. But by all means, Indigenous people are among the most vulnerable groups regarding cultural autonomy. Just think about the Amazon, where the Indigenous groups were forced into a nation-state they never asked for, and where the president – Bolsonaro – essentially wants to cut down the entire rainforest to make money from logging, soya and pastoralism, and to open it up for the mining industry. There are hundreds of small, stateless groups living in the Amazon and who are increasingly threatened by this onslaught of modernity just for the sake of profit. However, the argument I'm making is not mainly about Indigenous groups, it's about everybody, about finding ways of making peace with your surroundings in your own way. And it could be relevant to mention a conversation I had a couple of years ago with the well-known British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy, about the kind of cultural creativity that slavery miraculously gave birth to. Both Paul and I are all for the urban life, mixing, impurity, creolization, hybridity, you name it. He is of mixed origins himself. But then at one point I asked him: So Paul, what do you think is the most important thing you can do now? His slightly surprising answer was that we should do our best to relate seriously to our ecological surroundings, with the neighborhood, with that little clump of trees which is growing next door which you have never noticed before, so that you can scale down your engagement with the surroundings and realize that we are in the world. One way of cooling down is scaling down. This would clearly be a good thing both for bio- and cultural diversity. It's not easy and it's not simple, and yet ... During this century, we're going to have to accept the fact that there will be less material assets in the affluent part of the world. There will be enormous pressure on us to consume less and live in less destructive ways. Africa is in an opposite situation. Most Africans have contributed little to ecological catastrophe, climate change and diversity loss, but they are faced with the bill every day through climate change effects. The city of New York alone produces more greenhouse gases than the entire African continent. There's no problem with overheating in Nigeria and Mali, in fact there should have been more metaphorical heat in their societies. They need things to happen in order to make a living. But the global middle and upper classes have to accept the fact that we're going to consume less and it's going to be a good thing, since we then can engage in more satisfactory ways with other people and our immediate surroundings. The danger is that this will lead to xenophobia and bigoted nationalism, but it's not a necessary outcome. Um, so yeah: One of the major causes of the loss of diversity is to do with scale, the kind of standardization resulting from scaling up for the sake of profits and efficiency. There is this enticing book, I don't know if you've come across it, Martina, by the American sociologist George Ritzer. It's called *The McDonaldization of Society* (Ritzer, 1993). Ritzer speaks about standardization from a Weberian point of view, describing how we increasingly have created a modularized world where it is as though you have a box of Lego blocks which you can assemble in different ways, but they will still be Lego blocks. His view that there is less and less diversity

and more and more homogeneity, simplification and standardization in the world of consumption. And, you know, when I have his book and his argument at the back of my mind and think about biodiversity, it is clear that they're talking about the same thing. The plantation is like the shopping mall. If you can make coconut trees grow in Trinidad, why shouldn't you be able to grow them in Mauritius? If you can do it big, why do it small when big yields greater profits?

A Solution: Scaling Down in Different Dimensions of Our Lives

Martina: Yes. It's quite clear, so in order to contrast that, to reduce the loss of diversity, it's important to scale down in different dimension of our life.

Thomas: Yes, we should really think seriously about decentralizing. But as always, we need to think dialectically and about striking a balance between opposites, lest we are left with the sound from one hand clapping. We will continue to need some large-scale big things. We need states, and we need multilateral cooperation of a kind resembling the UN system, at least as an ideal type. It is therefore a matter of some concern that in the overheating years since 1990, multilateralism and international cooperation have been weakened substantially. There is more competition now, less collaboration. The IMF, the World Bank, the UN and the NGO world; we may have mixed feelings about them, but still they were important to keep the global dialogue going and to help people raise their gaze above parochial concerns. And so we're going to need these institutions, plus – naturally – complex societies need coordination of their public activities. But a lot of other things can and should be scaled down. So I do think that the focus and emphasis should now be on the local and on what I call *sideways scaling*. That is the kind of coordinated, ultimately global form of organization which is not top-down but consists in connections between local groups and places. This form of coordination has been facilitated greatly through electronic communication, not least the smartphone – which, paradoxically, is itself a flattening device in some ways.

Martina: Yeah. I'm curious. You have a strong relation between you as a person and you as a scholar in your life every day. You are how you are trying to scale down. How do you contribute to on what you are studying?

Thomas: Personally, I enjoy the small things. It's not difficult for me. I mean, I enjoy being with my family and going for walks. Every day at work, I take breaks, go for short walks and smell the flowers. There's a small nature reserve just next door, which is a bit larger than the Institute's garden. It's not huge, but it also has footpaths, majestic trees and a teeming insect life.

Diversity always manifests itself locally. It is often unscalable, unlike the plantation or the smartphone app. And well, since we started this conversation by talking about Marvel films and how they seem to be superdiverse. But when you look closely, you realize that they may be socially diverse, but with a few exceptions not

particularly culturally diverse, since they are all built into the same framework. And let's just look at food. I just came across an interesting article by an Indian woman who claimed that many might still talk about the recipes from your grandmother that had been handed down and which had some unique characteristics, with secret ingredients and so on. But this is nowadays an increasingly obsolete view, she says, adding that Indian women around the world, if they want to cook something Indian that they remember from their childhood and they don't know how to do it, they go on YouTube. So where is the uniqueness in this recipe? In other words, you make the same dish as thousands of other Indian women around the world. Perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps everybody does it in their unique way anyway. But the change she identifies is fascinating. She speaks of standardization and homogenization with globalized digital media as a medium. By all means, there are positive things about this development. It's not just about loss. Often, those women get access to recipes they were only dimly aware of if at all, so YouTube expands their culinary world. And besides, sometimes the reduction of diversity can be a good thing. Getting hooked onto the grammar of modernity may give you opportunities to travel, to learn from others, to expand your world. You can have contacts across boundaries, which you didn't before. And regarding food crops, it is obviously a blessing for Aotearoa New Zealand that they imported sheep in the nineteenth century, and they have so many that the sheep currently outnumber people by a factor of six. The sheep do not seem to have created huge ecological imbalances, at least not to my knowledge.

Martina: Yes. So you are balancing a negative and positive side or the reduction?

Thomas: Yes, although the big picture is grim, there is nuance, and there are alternatives which exist, thrive and are perfectly viable. There is a fun, but also well-informed, book about species invasion, called *Where do Camels Belong?* by Ken Thompson (2014). Essentially, what he is saying is that foreign species are often harmless and sometimes beneficial to biodiversity. It's quite controversial, but he has lots of good examples of positive species interactions, and he also worries that when we speak too much about invasive species, it could lead to an unhealthy, static view of ecology and even racism.

Martina: In other words, it's funny that aren't as good as most of these.

Thomas: Some of these species fit in really easily, and they can even enrich the local biosphere. They don't threaten anybody. The majestic oaks lining the streets of Stellenbosch are doing fine, and I don't think they have done much damage to other species. They just made it a more pleasant place to live for humans. So when thinking about Thompson's approach, I am reminded of the way some South Africans speak about immigrants from Zimbabwe. South Africa is a country with its share of xenophobia, not just between the traditional apartheid categories of whites, blacks, Indians and coloureds, but also towards people from other African countries. When you rely on Uber for your local travel, you soon come to realize that nearly all the Uber drivers you meet are from Zimbabwe. The reason is that they cannot get a formal job, and when you work with Uber, you're self-employed. So as long as you don't speed or drive in a drunken state or do other foolish things, you can work with them. Zimbabweans have been skilled at finding and using these niches.

Yet, South African populist politicians argue that Zimbabweans who are coming here work for lower salaries than South Africans, taking our jobs from us and so on, just as your Salvini and Orbans might say in Europe. Economists object that this is simply isn't true. This kind of migration doesn't threaten anybody. It doesn't take anybody's jobs. In fact, it creates new jobs. You know, you're a Zimbabwean and you settle in the township of Kayamandi outside of Stellenbosch and you start a restaurant, you hire people, the food suppliers get more business, and there are other ripple effects. These contributions to the economy are often poorly understood by people who believe in economic arguments against migration. If you allow immigrants to work, they're going to. They are not parasites or invasive species, and indeed, many foreign species also work hard to fit into the local ecology.

Martina: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's a good way to close our conversation on diversity. It's an ironic side of the reduction of diversity. Yeah. What do you think?

Thomas: Yes. I was just going to say that I think the bottom line for me regarding cultural diversity is that we should give as much autonomy as possible to local communities in order to allow them to choose for themselves who they want to be and leave them with the option of withdrawing from modernity. Do we want to become more or less like everybody else, get a haircut and move into the city and get a salaried job? Or do we want to find a balance between keeping our traditions going and being members or part of the modern world? Some Indigenous groups are in fact doing pretty well. The Saami in northern Scandinavia are a good example. Actually, many of them have found a viable balance between sticking to their traditions and being part of the modern world. So there's no necessarily contradiction here. And the same goes for biodiversity, there is a need to be pragmatic. But what we need to object to and to react to is the random and insensitive destruction we see around us – the razing of rainforests, the destruction of waterways, short-sighted overfishing, plastic pollution – there is a study which shows how many of the world's mammals are wild. Four percent of the mammalian biomass in the world are wild. *Four per cent!* 36 percent are humans. That's you and me. 36 per cent humans and 60 per cent domestic animals, mainly pigs and cattle. When you see these figures, you come to realize that there is something at stake, there is something important happening. And it's not about puritanism, it's not about a romantic view of nature. It's merely part of the search for ways out of the corner into which we have painted ourselves.

Interlude: Conversation with a Social Worker About the First Pandemic Wave

Abstract. Thomas was due to arrive in Italy in December 2021, but infection rates were rising again at the time, making it unwise to arrive in a country with restrictions still in place and likely to increase. We had planned an 'ethnography day' during what was called the first outbreak of the pandemic in Italy, in Vo' Euganeo, a small town in the hills not far from Padua. I thought of a way to include a voice about the

first wave in our book. I found a social worker who had been involved at the time, and Thomas interviewed her one morning. What emerges from the unprecedented situation described by the social worker is a complete reversal of people's habits, of how we relate, and how we think about each other. We thought of including this interview largely because - later on - we both had the feeling that everyone would begin to move on from the shock caused by the pandemic, and the aim of this interlude is so that it is not forgotten. Following the spirit of Zerubavel's sociology, we included this chapter in our conversations to add a small brick to the social legacy of the past.

Thomas: Thanks for being here. It isn't easy to remember the very beginning . . . when did all this begin?

Social worker (SW): ... the first day of that March? I remember only this visit to my doctor's because I went there with a boy from Bangladesh for a check-up. You know, this type of thing is normal. They (people from Bangladesh) don't believe in viruses. So, as you can imagine, I was stuck in that hospital with people who didn't care about the emergency.

Thomas: You're saying the Bangladeshis didn't really believe in the pandemic.

SW: Yes, but they weren't the only ones. Africa does not believe in a pandemic. From my experience, Nigerians don't believe in this pandemic. They only get vaccinated because they want to go away (out?).

Thomas: I see, you were working during the early days of March 2020. How has the situation changed in the last year and a half? I mean, what's new, and in what way is it different?

SW: There have been various definitions of the situation, and this I think this is very bad - the type of information, especially about vaccines. It's just impossible to stay in Italy now (December 2021, research note) because there is a strong polarization. Some people are all for vaccines and don't look at anything else. They don't look at any collateral aspects, for example. On the other hand, there are people who look at all the collateral issues. There's a trap door (?) in everyone's social life because, stuck in this polarization, it is impossible to stay together.

Thomas: Yeah, right. But this seems to be something to do with the vaccine. I mean, about a year ago everybody was waiting for the vaccine. They were saying 'as soon as we get the vaccine the problem will go away'. Then the vaccine arrived and things turned out to be a little bit more complicated. It seems to me there is something about this vaccine that makes it different from other vaccines. For example, I recently heard about some people from Georgia, who were living in France, and who didn't want to have the Covid jab. They were arguing with their French friends, who said, "Look, it's irresponsible. You have to do it" . . . the usual argument, right? Then it turns out that the people who didn't want the Covid jab had been vaccinated against other ailments, such as typhoid, measles and so on, and this hadn't been a problem for them. So there seems to be something about this Covid vaccine that scares people.

SW: I remember the words of my grandmother: she said that we don't want something in a straight way because, when the thing arrives, it's different from what we really wanted. The situation is very similar with this vaccine. We wanted it. But

when we got the vaccine, things changed, and we had many ideas in our heads. And science can't solve all of this.

Thomas: Do you think this has something to do with the fact that the state is in effect trying to force people to get vaccinated, in other words that it isn't really voluntary? If you don't get the jab, it creates a lot of problems for you. I just heard a story from a friend who is a professor of law. He was in Slovakia to launch a book, and it turned out that his translator wasn't allowed to enter the auditorium with him during the book presentation because he was unvaccinated. The law professor concluded that this was an authoritarian and probably unconstitutional practice. It creates a kind of vaccination state, which takes away certain democratic rights. This would probably not be so much of a problem for the Bangladeshis you talked about, but might be so for many Italians. You currently have demonstrations in Rome against the Green Pass, and so on.

SW: Yes, now guess my friends want to go to a restaurant, for example, but a lot of my friends are not vaccinated, they are stuck in a choice. For me, the Green Pass is not the solution if you want to share life moments. But the Green Pass is the solution for a company where you are working. So, for me it's not the solution, it's a problem.

Thomas: Yes, there is considerable uncertainty, but the government has to give the impression that they are doing the right thing, that they are being efficient, and they have a clear policy. But it leaves you with a bad aftertaste. As a citizen, you go into a restaurant and you have to show your vaccination pass every time you go somewhere. But you said something about the information that people had been given, that hadn't been adequate, or hadn't been good enough for minorities, for example. But if they don't trust the information they get from the State anyway, maybe they don't believe - as you said, they didn't believe in the pandemic. They had been afflicted by far worse crises before. To them, it may have been just like a flu, which God might take care of.

SW: For example, if I try to think about this problem. I don't have an answer, but I have a hope that one day I'll have an answer because I'm a social worker. I am not a doctor and therefore with respect to the informed choice of vaccine I can only decide for myself. It becomes deontologically complex for me to explain some thing I don't know - whose effects are unknown to me - to illiterate people. Hence my difficulty in demanding that these people get vaccinated.

Thomas: There are different groups that are skeptical about the vaccine in European countries, and I assume it would be the same in Italy. I mean, obviously, you have people from minorities because they basically don't trust the state. They see no reason why they should. Then there are people who don't trust science. They don't believe in science partly because science has been wrong in the past, but there is often a deeper mistrust, a conspiratorial mistrust in mainstream society lurking underneath. Then you have parts of the Green Movement. You know, if you believe in ecology, and you are wary of laboratory-produced chemicals, and you have something enter your body, piercing the skin to make a hole in your body, and then pump an unknown fluid inside, and you don't know what it is? Many are afraid of doing exactly that. Then, moreover, there may be people on the left. Quite a few leftists are highly critical of the pharmaceutical industry. They are perfectly well

aware of the way in which Pfizer and some of these companies have made billions of dollars producing these vaccines, so they have a strong economic interest in pushing it. There may be many kinds of reasons why people are critical of this. Then there's the human rights aspect. Am I not to be treated equally as a human being just because I have made this choice? It's difficult because there are so many different groups that resist the vaccine. But what do you think should have been done differently?

Social worker: So, if there are problems - for example, I take two pills every day because I have a heart problem. I know that I know it works well for my heart, but it can-in the long run-have effects on other organs.

Thomas: What this means, I guess, is that it is to a great extent a matter of trust. While you were talking, I was just thinking that there are so many things we don't understand, but that we accept, such as the weather forecasts? If they tell you to expect a snowstorm tomorrow, you naturally expect it to snow and prepare accordingly. You have no idea how the meteorologists know this, but you trust the information you get because it's usually right. We use a lot of technology that we don't understand the first thing about, like this video conference, and most of us do not see that as problematic at all. But I think there is something here to do with your body and health that makes things different. I've seen this because I've been doing fieldwork in Australia about pollution, climate change and that sort of thing. Most of the people in the city where I worked didn't really care about climate change. They cared a bit about pollution, but they cared a lot about health. If there were signs of some emissions - foul-smelling dust in the air, smoke, or whatever - that could have an effect on their health, they would react. Anything to do with our bodies and health is therefore very sensitive. It's very personal and intimate. And it is bounded, certainly when it comes to health. We often think that we make boundaries. I mean, we have an obsession with boundaries between groups, between individuals, and your first boundary, as a person, is the boundary of your skin. Anything that is outside your skin is not you. This is where I end. I start and end with my skin. So, if someone makes a hole in your skin and pushes something into it, it is a fairly dramatic thing. We know this from the past. On the other hand, if we think about vaccination history - I'm just thinking aloud - vaccination history in Africa, for example, health workers managed to get most Africans to take the smallpox or polio vaccine. So, after a while, smallpox was gone, but not Covid.

SW: I only work with minorities, but I don't know if I'm a minority on this show. We don't have all the answers. I can only say I try to find a better solution for these people. But I suppose that sometimes there are good solutions for them.

Thomas: Yes. You know what? I'd like to ask you something more about Covid and minorities that you see. One reason is that one of my students just submitted his master's thesis. He is Italian, but his father is from Burkina Faso, so he is a black Italian. He is from Macerata. He did fieldwork in his hometown during the pandemic because he was able to travel, since he is Italian. He has been looking into the exclusion of Africans, meaning mainly the way in which Africans are somehow stigmatized, they never get fully accepted in society, and how this creates some vicious circles of exclusion because they are forced to work in the informal sector. Many of them are then forced into petty crime, you know, just to survive, and they

don't get to know many Italians. One of the main subjects he discusses in this dissertation is systematic racist exclusion, which seems to have got worse during the pandemic, with all kinds of stories circulating about Africans and other non-Europeans spreading the disease. The pandemic has just magnified inequality. It has just made matters a lot worse. Many people have lost their jobs. They are being even more stigmatized by Italian society because they are not vaccinated. And it has made things even harder for them. What do you think?

SW: I think that's true. But, for example, all my beneficiaries must want to get vaccinated because they're afraid of losing their job. But I think that's not too good for them, because they do these things not because they think they're right for them, but only because they have no alternative. I feel so sorry for them. You know, there are many problems for us because, for example, there is a very difficult thing, for immigration and immigrants, the language: Italian is a difficult language and it is difficult to learn, and sometimes they don't even want to learn it. They don't want to learn and they don't want to be with Italian people. They want to stay with the eastern community. And it's a very big problem because they don't trust us. For example, I work with Corporal Abdul, ok? And I have a help desk, a point where people come, and the story is the same. My friends who live in villages near me in Bangladesh just say that you need to go to work in this place. There you go. If I say there's a good job, there's a good job for you in another place. So, with Italian people, the Italian police that try to keep in touch with them. They don't want to go. No. They don't trust me.

Thomas: Basically, the reason why they are in Italy is to be able to send money home, so it is important for them to save money.

SW: Yes, it's difficult at the moment. It's very, very difficult for Italians, but also for immigrants. There is a lot of money that the worker needs. But there is the problem of language. It was quite a difficult job and it was difficult to explain in English or in Bangla, with people who can explain. There are companies that need workers for some that do not have work and no connections. We try to get some schools to back up the language they need. Almost the B1 level, they don't have B1, and they need that one year to have the B1 level, and they want to study. And I think that's the problem of admitting that they don't recognize us and we don't recognize them. Because we think that many things, for example, they are your worker's money, clothes are important. I don't speak for me, but I speak for my society. But this is not the case. This is an important thing. We don't make a connection because I can't understand what they really want and they don't really understand what we need. And this is the reason why at this moment there is there is no real connection between us practitioners and our beneficiaries.

Thomas: What you're saying is very interesting because this is one of the things I have been discussing with my student. I mean, having worked with minority issues in other countries, there are certain things that you recognize. And one of his arguments is that there is a lot of racist exclusion in Italy, which is probably true – as in other European countries. But then there is another side to this as well, which you are describing, namely that many people belonging to minorities are not really interested in Italian society. So in a way, it goes both ways. Now about the current

situation with the pandemic, it has gone on for a long time, creating a lot of divisions in society, as we were saying. And it is also, I mean, it has magnified or strengthened certain inequalities that were already there, like ethnicity and race, and so on. How do you see the situation a year from now? Will this continue? Is this the new normal?

SW: I asked two of my friends yesterday if it's possible to stay together in a very small place like two years ago, together. It's very stupid. Like eating at the same place, for example, getting food, ok? And she said, I suppose that's not possible, ok? And I think that for people like me who are 40 years old after this period, it is that. I fear to go to a restaurant, I fear to go to a theatre. I'm afraid too. For example, going to dinner all together to meet someone new. Ok, because I don't know where you're going. And if this is a problem for me, for other people and me thinking about it every day, you know, because I don't want the death of my life, is that. Only fear, only through fear.

Thomas: I think you're right. I mean, this is something that somehow has become part of our culture. I mean, before February or March 2020, it was so unproblematic to deal with people in an informal and relaxed way. You could go out, you could travel. You didn't have to worry about anything. And now I think that tourism, for example, will be different for a long time. You know, who wants to go on vacation to another country where you have no idea what things are like, what kind of bacteria, viruses, what kind of diseases? And then you have what you say about just being with other people. Today, on this Friday, we were supposed to have our big Christmas party at my anthropology department with about 100 people, the director, the Ph.D. students, and so on, which was canceled. Lots of people in this part of the world have this sort of pre-Christmas gathering where they go out to a restaurant with colleagues or whatever. Almost everything has been canceled, so even if restaurants have re-opened, people aren't go. And I wonder if something of this is going to last, so we are going to treat each other with a little bit more suspicion and fear than we did. My hunch is that this is going to last for a long time. I think it's unnatural. You know, I mean, it's a word I use very rarely, ok? But in this case, it is not natural for us people, us human beings, because what is normal for us is to be together with other people. In many if not most cultures in the world eating together, having a communal meal, is crucial. It is the most important social event of all. And in many parts of the world, like Somalia, but also in India, and so on, people eat with their hands. So you have this big bowl of food and people just help themselves. This kind of communal meal would be what they now call a super spreader kind of event. But for many people, this is the main thing. It is not something that you can do without. So that is why I am saying that there is something very unnatural. You know, when this pandemic came in March last year, I immediately thought that this might, in the long run, be a good thing for the climate and the environment because we will get used to doing things a bit more slowly, traveling less, eating less, and being more with other people. But increasingly, what we see is that it is catastrophic because it destroys social relations. I mean, you have students you may have never met. I've only seen them on Zoom and that kind of thing. It's not good at all.

SW: But we must try to find a solution. I try to do my best for other people. But I think that the road is still long. We accept that we are not immortal, and then we can in some way.

Thomas: Yes, that's a lesson. There is something to learn.

SW: Yes, it is not so simple for us because we have a lot of feelings for everything. We think that our life is the most important life. But I don't know. I don't, because I'm not that important. No, no, I wouldn't ask about whether I stay in this world or not. I think things are different, that for many people, I try to do my best for people who work with me. I try. And if I make the difference in my life for just one person, that's ok. I can go.

Thomas: Yes, well, that's a very good attitude, and I think it is also something we might learn. I hope that we might learn from the pandemic, and I've also written about this - the fact that we are vulnerable, weak, and mortal, and we aren't going to live forever. Maybe that is something we could learn from the current crisis. So, that would make us a little bit humbler and maybe a bit more grateful. I don't know. You know, five years ago I had a very serious illness, I had major surgery for cancer. For about two years, I was basically dying. It seemed as if it was time to say goodbye. Then somehow I managed to recover. Nobody understands why, but I'm still here. But during those two years, my own micro-experience was very similar to the sort of thing we can learn from the Covid pandemic at a higher systemic level - that you realized you weren't going to live forever, that you are weak and vulnerable. We can do our best and maybe on my gravestone, they could write: okay, everything went to hell, but at least you did your best?

Perhaps that is all we can hope for. So maybe I should say, in this kind of society, we have been so used to thinking that we are indestructible and that there's a pill for everything. And you can stay young if you eat your carrots and go jogging every morning. But that is not the way it is. Now, even young people occasionally get seriously ill from Covid and so on, and in a complex situation with a lot of uncertainty, there is a great demand for simple answers, to help them make sense of what's happening. So, yeah, it could be a conspiracy theory - the idea that the government is doing this to us, so we have to be critical of everything they say. Or it could be another simple answer, namely that God will take care of this since he has created everything including viruses. I mean, you'll find some kind of answer that you can easily understand, as you were saying, during our conversation, there are so many things to look at. There are so many complexities around the pandemic that it's hard to know where to begin. And when we ask, you know, what should we have done? What should we do? We don't really have the answer. We have to muddle through, as so often.

SW: The reason is that I don't know if it's black or white. There are a lot of callers these days, and the people need the only way because it's not possible for a lot of people to understand the complexity of the world. It's really like, you know, I've got to say this, if you do that you don't go to paradise. Everything will be done. Yes, it's the same vaccine that is paradise or no vaccine. Paradise isn't real. Because in every action that we take, there is that I would . . . the way it is. I would pass and then I wouldn't bother shaping every decision. There are a couple of issues, not good or

bad, but it's difficult for us to understand. So if people think that all I could do is do a little bit, study or make something, it is the best thing you can do. It is white or some narrow black for the same. Not gold. This cooler master learned the metal how I can find something, how I can find a solution for a problem, but it's not the best, the way it is the best, the way that I can go in that moment with the debt, that information, for one thing, this moment that I am back, it isn't the bad. The solution. Different.

Thomas: Exactly. It has been wonderful talking to you. But we have to go. I'm sure you have to work and I thank you so much for sharing your experience. It has been fantastic. It has been great and good luck with everything. You are doing a very important job.

SW: I try to do my best about that, and I know it is bad (laughing).

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Chapter 4

Unstable Identities



Abstract In Southern Europe there's a specific issue regarding young people – the focus of our overheated identities. Not only do youth unemployment rates in the Mediterranean remain among the highest in Europe, but these countries also perform poorly in at least two of the three dimensions of job quality, which are: the quality of earnings, or the extent to which workers' earnings from their job contribute to their well-being; labor market security; and the quality of the working environment (OECD, *Society at a glance* 2019, 2019). Like Spain and Greece, Italy is always at the top of the Eurostat tables for important problems (see NEET rates: with the pandemic, the number of young people aged 15–29 who are not in education, employment or training in Italy increased from 22.1 percent in 2019 to 23.3 percent in 2020 and 24 percent in 2021 There are more than two million NEETs in Italy - boys and girls who are neither studying nor working and more than 97,000 young people have left their work or study paths in the last year. What we would like to reflect on is “unstable identities” (Eriksen, *Overheating: An anthropology of accelerated change*, 2016a; Eriksen, *History and Anthropology*, 27(5):469–487, 2016b, Eriksen, *Culturologia: The Journal of Culture*, 4(1):2–11, 2016c, Eriksen, *Overheating: An anthropology of accelerated change*, 2016d, Eriksen, *History and Anthropology*, 27(5):469–487, 2016e), and how “stable identities” can be constructed in overheating societies – starting from young people and the difficulty of becoming adults in southern Europe. But the conversation will go also beyond that.

Accelerated Change Out of Control and Social Identities

Thomas: Let me just say a few general things first, which have to do with the relationship between accelerated change out of control and social identities, which as a result become very volatile. Another important aspect of overheating is that different parts of a culture, or society, change at different speeds. The result is a disconnect or a lack of snug fit between different institutions in society. You then discover that your ideal type or model of society fails to describe society properly. In the cities of the Middle East, there exists an urban labor market based on individual

labour contracts and wage work, but traditional family values remain, which make it difficult for women to enter the labor market on equal terms with men, and this is bad news not just for the women in purdah, but also for the economy, which effectively misses out on nearly half of its potential labour force. But let me put this to you, as a resident of Padova in the heartlands of Italy. One of the things that has been noticed about Italy is that there has been quite a bit of resistance to some aspects of globalization. Italians still have very strong regional identities, regional foods and local identities, which go against the idea of that nineteenth century invention, the nation state. So Italy is not as coherent, as it were, or cohesive. It's more diverse as a nation state than countries like Sweden or Norway, where an invisible umbilical cord connects you to the state as an individual, and where conformity and similarity are seen as necessary components of national identity. Italy is a country of regional pastas and pestos, a multitude of local accents, it was also where the slow food movement started, which is no coincidence since food diversity is one of the aspects of diversity which is being threatened by the flattening bulldozer of globalization. The standardization of food is more widespread than most are aware, and it is one aspect of overheated globalization which is rarely properly addressed. The way in which diversity in food is also being decreased because we risk losing a rich and nuanced vocabulary for talking about food. Yesterday, my wife and I went to an Indian restaurant here in Stellenbosch. There aren't many – most restaurants there are European – and the menu was just like you'd expect in an Indian restaurant in London or New York. There is some diversity, but there is also standardization. And in Italy, there's been a lot of resistance to this tendency. There are Italian dishes which can only be made in certain ways and even in particular places, and knowledge about food is still incorporated and locally anchored to a great extent. This could be important when we think about identity, belonging and people's destabilized identities. For what is identity? You look at yourself in the mirror and you ask yourself, Who am I? But we also ask ourselves, Who do I want to be? Because you have a project perhaps for improving yourself, or perhaps you are going somewhere and your life is a story which is meant to unfold like a narrative, like a novel, like a good film, like a good history book written by a skilled historian, in a linear sweep from cradle to grave. So you want to be part of a narrative that makes your life cohesive, and this is becoming increasingly difficult because of the uneven speed of change and also because of the very presence of certain changes that make it difficult to navigate.

This is the sense in which we may perhaps properly speak of our time as being post-modern. Modernity was framed – indeed to some extent defined – through ideas of development, improvement and progress. This was very useful at a time when religion was gradually losing its grip and credibility, certainly in Europe. So the idea of progress, whether Marxist, liberal or conservative, similarly gave people personal hope provided history with a direction, so that when you looked at yourself in the mirror in the morning, you could say, I'm part of this, I'm going to be an engineer, I'm going to do this, that or the other, and I'm going to make the world a better place through the means of rationality, science, technology or simply by being part of this big story. Also – and this has a bearing on the current crisis of youth identities in

southern Europe – the presumption was that your own life would be more fulfilling and in important ways better than the lives of my parents. Now, in the last couple of decades and certainly since the financial crisis, many young people in countries like Spain, Greece and Italy no longer expect that they will be better off than their parents. So that's one part of the story which is more visible in southern Europe than in say, Germany or Denmark. Young people live with their parents longer than they would have wanted to because rent is prohibitive and mortgages are difficult to get. Some speak about an entire lost generation who were so disillusioned, around 2010, that they didn't even bother to go to university because they didn't expect there to be any jobs. This is what I was told in Spain when I was visiting the Costa Blanca around that time. Obviously, this is anecdotal evidence, but your research, and that of others, shows that there is a pattern. So a part of the peculiar, specific story about identity in southern Europe for young people is that they find it hard to see a direction in their lives. There's a lot of disillusion and loss of hope. Many no longer assume things to get better. We see it in northern Europe as well in a slightly different way, among young people who have a strong commitment to the climate and the environment: we also see this sort of lack of fit between the ideal of progress and the realities of environmental destruction. But in southern Europe, it has more to do with precarity and a volatile and unpredictable economy, and the fact that it's impossible or difficult to plan your life in of linear way. You have to improvise. We have to make it up as we go along.

A Fight Between David and Goliath

Martina: Indeed, I think it's difficult to change the structural conditions in this way. As Beck said, we find individual solutions to structural problems. I also think we are in the new moment in which we can't forget the other side of the coin.

You know the legend of David and Goliath? Sometimes I think we are just like David (see Visentin, 2018). I'm going to be 40, and I think younger people are coping with a lot of obstacles, variable factors that seldom become opportunities to create your own future. But I think that if we stay in the metaphor of neoliberalism where you are a winner or loser, it's impossible to look at the problem in a different way. I think being an underdog could also open up new possibilities. I don't have a permanent job, but maybe I can change, and I can choose my career of a lifetime, for example. I think a point of weakness could become a point of strength, but it's hard. It's always hard. I also think the intersectionality approach could help us to interpret things in a better way...

Thomas: I think you are right. Precarity can give you some flexibility in a paradoxical way, but you have to be able to benefit from it. I mean, because you can have total freedom like young people I've met in West Africa, for example: somebody has to feed them; there are no strings attached, but they have nothing. So they have every possibility and no possibilities, every option and no options. So, for this freedom or flexibility to work, there have to be some real alternatives that people

are able to imagine and eventually benefit from. If that is the case, yes, and obviously there have been some cultural changes which have given people in other parts of the world, let's say in Western Europe, more personal freedom because we have been told that you can create your life yourself. You have choices. You have alternatives. You don't have to do what your mother or your father did. You can actually do other things and you will probably have to do other things because the labor market is constantly changing. My son, who is 24, has a part-time job in a company where they do blockchain technology. He's a mathematician, so he programs a bit, and does other things. Just 10 years ago, blockchain didn't exist. Now it's becoming possibly a big part of certain segments of the economy. So that's one reason why we have to make these choices, but it gives us freedom. But you know, absolute freedom is a fiction because freedom has to be somehow embedded in a complex assemblage or a broader social setting in order to be meaningful. So, this is where many feel the crunch because they have been told that it is their responsibility. They have been taught that they can make their own choices. Nobody is going to take them by the hand and drag them into adult life. The contrast is stark with the kind of stateless, small-scale societies where you went through your age-grades and eventually initiation, you got married, and then you started your adult life in earnest. European adolescents live in a very different world, which is more volatile and uncertain. Perhaps it is also more liberating. But the freedom surplus we see among young people in southern Europe today is a healthy reminder of the limitations of neoliberalism. Being a free individual able to choose from the self-service cafeteria of life can be invigorating, but only as long as you're sailing with the wind.

Another way of expressing this is simply that neoliberalism can be liberating and invigorating as long as you're successful, realising yourself as an individual. But the moment you hit the wall, the moment you lose your job, or you are unable to pay your bills, you discover that you have nobody to go to because you have lived in an individualist bubble. Regarding young people, there is a trade-off here between freedom and security. Sometimes you can't have both. Security can be a straitjacket because it doesn't give you individual choice, but it can also be comforting that you have someone to go to with your problems, someone who listens to you, someone who can help you out, and so on. This is where family comes in, and I wonder if there isn't a story to be told about a radical transformation of family organization in Italy, which has to a great extent taken place in your lifetime, since the population is currently declining. This is significant because it says something about the success of feminism, but this has also led to a disjuncture between women's rights and the domestic division of labour. Getting the work-life balance right in such a way that it makes sense for couples to have children becomes more difficult when the different subsystems are not synchronized. When we think about intersectionality, if you just pursue that a little bit further, if we start with a complex society where people have different cultural identities and so on, we could take a country like Italy, or the United Kingdom, where you have black and white and brown people. Consider a black man who's doing rather well in his job. He's an engineer and makes good money. Then you have a white woman who doesn't do too well. She works as an underpaid and overworked assistant nurse in an underfunded hospital and lives

frugally – which of these two people is ranked higher in society? Who has the higher social status? There's no simple answer to this. In a racialized society, you might think that black people are automatically at the bottom of the ladder. But it's not true because they have other identities as well, and other ways of succeeding. So that's one place to begin.

But the second thing I'd like to say, which is more directly about overheating and change is that, since there are several rhythms of change and continuity in a society and in a person's life, is the fact that the way you see yourself doesn't always fit snugly with other ways in which you also see yourself. There may be frictions. There may be a disconnect between the different aspects of who you are. It's hard to create a coherent narrative of yourself as a person because you seem to shift depending on what the situation is. And this also means that it's very hard to be consistent. Consider descendents of settlers in Australia who belong to some minority, which could be Lebanese, Greek or Korean. They may be resentful about racism in mainstream Australian society, but at the same time, they may not be too keen to support Aboriginal causes. You may also find that people who belong to one kind of minority don't necessarily sympathize with people who belong to a different minority; Muslims do not necessarily support LGBT rights. It's an issue that we've been working with over here and which is also relevant for your earlier research in Norway. One of our researchers was looking at the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in schools. She did her research in a school with great ethnic, religious and class diversity. This researcher doubled as an activist promoting a kind of gender democracy enabling people to break free of binary identities regarding gender. But she was also adamant about defending Muslim rights. There was just one minor problem, namely that the Muslims she came to know, mainly boys, were positively hostile towards any gender identity except the conventional, patriarchal, heterosexual one. In this kind of situation, the different parts of identity, personal or collective, don't quite fit together.

Martina: It's possible to manage this phenomenon. It's another paradox.

Thomas: It is a paradox. And it's very much about overheating because you could say that not everything is overheating. Some phenomena are in fact cooling down. This is why when we spoke of traditionalism, the paradox is that trying to stretch back into the past, and hang on to something which seems stable and secure, which could be harmless, rarely works. These traditions could be associated with food, language, religion or something else. Suppose that we want to keep our language devoid of contamination from English, for example. This is not a game you can win, unless you relinquish extensive contact with the outside world. Everything is contaminated. As I mentioned, Stellenbosch is also known as Eikestad, which means oak town, but strictly speaking, the oaks don't belong here. So how can you search for something which is authentic, which is solid and stable so that you have a place to stand when everything else is moving very fast? It's very, very hard, you know, to live in a society where everything seems to be in free flow. Perhaps we all need a core which is permanent, which doesn't change, and if it doesn't exist, we have to invent it. This is where certain forms of nationalism come into the picture. It is never too late to get a happy childhood. Or an unhappy one, depending on what

you need. This imbalance between heating up and cooling down is very much an overheating effect.

Martina: In my opinion, for this chapter, I need to find a good example. Sorry, I don't work on intersectionality and gender and so on. But I can choose something about literature, novels, for example. I can choose an example from Zadie Smith's novels.

Thomas: She's very relevant to this discussion. The entire tradition that she belongs to, even if reluctantly, and although she's a novelist – I have radical cultural studies in mind – was very intersectional from the start although they didn't use the word as it was invented in America in the late 1980s. But these intellectuals, with a core in the Birmingham school of cultural studies, were exploring class, gender and race, and tried to see these criteria of group identity as a whole. These are important, valuable contributions to thinking about belonging in a destabilized environment. One dimension is nevertheless often missing, which struck me only last weekend on a visit to Johannesburg. That is an old mining city; rich, poor, violent, unequal, masculine in a way that makes Cape Town seem like a city on the French Riviera. So in Johannesburg, there are enormous mansions with huge gardens just a few kilometers from Soweto, where people live in very small houses, often shacks with no tap water or grid electricity. This kind of inequality does something to the way you see yourself. All strong identities come at a cost, it is necessary to think about social identities in relation not just to the mirror image or social networks, but also the material infrastructure. Let us take another example from closer to home. Although many prefer to see themselves mainly as consumers, work remains a source of identity. 'What do you do for a living?' is still a common opening question when you meet a new person at a party. The identity as a producer, or worker, remains strong, but it has since long been eclipsed by the identity as a consumer. The situation was exacerbated during the pandemic because of the new forms of instability, or flexibility, enabling millions to work from home. If you don't want to show up in a seminar, it's going to be hybrid anyway, so you can follow it online. We do that in academia all the time now, and people have to set up cameras. And so an entirely new profession of people who are good with streaming has emerged, and the people who speak have to make sure to not just address the live audience, but also the camera, so that people online feel that they are also part of the loop. You can't move around too much since you then move out of the picture. So that's one thing. But what I was going to say is that working from home has become more and more common, which is socially fragmenting and weakens the collective identity as workers. There's a disconnect here, an incongruence between the way our houses are built and the way we work. Like yourself, I believe, in the last couple of years I've been to very many people's homes online. Some of the people I meet just sit on the bed, some have found a workspace in the kitchen, while others just slouch on the sofa, as I often do at home. But they don't have a proper desk, since most flats were not designed to double as home offices. So there's a lack of symmetry between the way people work and the way their houses are constructed. In an oblique way, this is also one reason why it's so difficult to do something about inequality in South Africa. What are you going to do with the huge mansions in a more equal

society? Someone has to live there. And that in itself creates inequality in the material infrastructure that underpins people's identities.

Cooling Down Processes in the South

Martina: Talking about the future, I also think there are different time regimes about that. For example, in Italy, we have a cultural future that there is a form of present is a future, a future mesh on the pressure on the present. When I did interviews in Oslo in 2018 I remember that, for example, young Norwegian people ever a linear idea in our future, a product of a continuous progress. He in Italy is different. It's just we are a country without a future, in a way. So if young people have no idea about the future, it's quite difficult to plan.

Thomas: Yes, yes. But there are many possible futures. I think you're absolutely right. But there are also studies from northern Europe, from Norway and Sweden, which indicate that young people have some ideas about their own future and they think they're going to be OK. On the other hand, they're more pessimistic regarding the future of society. With the economic crisis as a backdrop, some blame migration, others blame the politicians, while yet others speak of climate change as an explanation for the current impasse. There are many factors which make people pessimistic regarding the future of society, yet they may think that their little bubble is somehow insulated from the outside world. And again, there is one sense in which we can talk about postmodernity in that those big collective projects we're building this society together, where everybody's input is necessary, are hard to identify and believe in these days. In southern Europe, this is even more visible than in the richer north, because of the lack of trust between citizens and the authorities. And it doesn't encourage that sort of thing. In Greece, there was a lot of venom and a lot of hostility towards the European Union some years ago, and Angela Merkel was made a scapegoat, although the bottom line was that Greece had de facto defaulted on their loans from other EU countries, notably Germany. I am conceiving of it as in a goldfish bowl. You're in a fairly small, secluded, safe world. There's a lot of chaos outside. But here, in my little bubble, I can be safe, which is in reality an illusion since we're all connected and mutually dependent. This is also one of the reasons why overheated globalization creates so much volatility and friction. The map does not fit the territory. You know, if something dramatic happens to the Chinese economy, it will have consequences for you and me, it will affect us almost immediately. The Russian assault on Ukraine is another reminder of global connectedness. Even here in South Africa, people talk about the war because it has indirect consequences for them as well.

Destabilized Identities

Martina: Yes. I have another question about unstable identities. Sometimes I found that you used unstable identities, sometimes destabilized identities. What is the difference?

Thomas: Um, maybe a difference is that destabilized identities somehow have been stable in the past and then something has happened which brings them out of balance, whereas unstable refers to a more chronic, permanent situation. I have spoken about small, stateless societies, but even in early modern societies, people had strong ideas about maturing and going through several phases in your life. In the anthroposophical tradition founded by Rudolf Steiner there is a notion that people are fully incarnated by the age of 28? At that age, you've become the person you will remain for the rest of your life. This may seem random, but the number 28 is not taken out of thin air. Around that age, you've presumably completed your education, perhaps you have a relationship of some kind and you're truly, fully adult. But it doesn't have to be 28. The idea of slow, cumulative growth through the stages of life is now being replaced by a frantic standstill at full speed. You're always unfixed, open and flexible. I can speak for myself. I turned 60 a couple of weeks ago. I don't feel 60, and I'm still learning, still trying to develop, trying to learn new things. It's still uncertain about a number of things. But the difference with people who are disillusioned with their lives and society is that when you have that sense of not going anywhere, that can be very painful, that is, the feeling that their life lacks a direction.

Martina: There's a connection with the metaphor of overheating because we have no limits on managing issues.

Thomas: We should not fall into the trap of romanticising earlier phases of modernity. There was a lot of uncertainty in the late nineteenth century in Europe because of industrialization and urbanization. People were removed from their rural surroundings and suddenly had to learn new skills, and there was technological change all around. So by all means, this sense of alienation is not entirely new, but it now seems to have been elevated to a natural feature of accelerated modernity. When I was a boy in the 1970s, we were speaking about the year 2000 as a distant future, and we were imagining what things would be like. You had this narrative in your head about some kind of development towards the year 2000. But then we just continued to speak about the year 2000 as the years went by, which meant that the future became shorter and shorter. The year 2000 eventually came and went, and there is no mobilising vision for another year in the near or distant future. Climate optimists may speak of 2030, 2040 and 2050, but this does not seem to generate a huge amount of enthusiasm. There has been a rupture with linear history, and similarly, the linear biography has ceased to encompass slow development through distinct life stages.

Young people are interesting to think with about current challenges since they don't have much of a past, and in the little past that they have, they were children, and they usually don't care to think too much about it since they rightly believe that

they have moved on from childhood. They do nevertheless have a very long future, but that future turns out to be vague and unspecific, out of focus. If you ask young people, 20-year-olds, 'Where do you see yourself in 10 years?', many of them wouldn't have a clue. They would have no idea. This is unfortunate in the sense that they then lack the possibility to build a cumulative life where they can pass through several phases, maturing and learning, and turning into a slightly different person at the age of, say, 30 or 40, than they were as adolescents. However, it seems that a more typical kind of youth identity in our part of the world can be summarized as a version of the tyranny of the moment, where neither past nor future matter very much, and where life is standing still at full speed. We have spoken about this before, but anyway, in ancient Greece, when people went through a crisis, usually a medical condition defined by the presence of a high fever, you were a slightly renewed and different person upon recovery, since you had gone through this terrible rite of passage and had learned something from it. And if we are incapable of doing that, and if we get a culture where the ideal is that you should mentally be 19 years old all your life, you should be open, flexible, open to new experiences and so on forever. I just had a thought since we're talking about identity and one of the most fundamental identities is gender. A generation ago, we used to think that there are certain things that don't change, such as gender and race. But, as research has shown, race can be quite relational, so that you can be black in one country and virtually white in another, depending on the local classifications. While I was doing fieldwork in Trinidad in 1989, there was a public celebration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. On that occasion, they invited an African-American historian from the University of Atlanta to talk about African contributions to world civilization. The only tricky detail was that in the United States, the professor would be considered black following the one-drop principle, but in the Caribbean, he was considered nearly white. He had clearly been warned, and had laid his plans. So he compensated for his pale skin by wearing very colorful West African clothes, which overshadowed his paleness. Race, in other words, is socially real, but culturally constructed and more flexible than it may seem. And what about gender? The same problem applies; it is socially real in the sense that there are usually two genders, but what that means is culturally circumscribed. When, in your own research, you're speaking with young people who don't have very clear scripts telling them how to go about being a good boy or man, girl or woman. The box of Lego has been jumbled and has to be reassembled again and again... Many elements in personal identity are now up for grabs, which can be liberating because this shows that there are different options, but it can also be a recipe of confusion, in accordance with the see-saw of security and freedom, stability and change. As a result of the current destabilization, non-binary identities have become visible and socially real. Support can be had in the efforts from organizations and movements fighting for the right to have a non-binary gender identity, which is fairly new, at least as a societal phenomenon. In a recent past, there were different sexual orientations, and the gay and lesbian movement started to become globalized in the 1970s. This meant that men who had sex with men in African countries, for example, could connect – at their personal peril – to a global movement with shared symbols, values and so on. I saw this in

Trinidad when I was invited to a gay party, which was great fun, and they used the same symbols as you would see in gay clubs in the USA, such as the pink triangle. Decades later, with transsexual identities and otherwise non-binary gender, the issue is taken a step further and we don't know where it's going to end, but we have noticed that it generates a great deal of passionate engagement. There are threats. There are demands. In the city of Trondheim in central Norway, the Norwegian University of Technology (NTNU), there was a group protesting against the fact that the toilets in the university were either male or female. The pictograms on the toilet doors the international icons for male and female toilets, and this group of very vocal students were protesting by arguing that there were people who neither identified as male nor female. The emergence of the new transgender movements indicate that in this destabilized situation, there are many options available for the individual, and nothing is fixed. While this can be liberating, it can also be stressful since you have to make choices that you haven't asked for.

Martina: I guess, for stability and to create a kind of consistent narrative out of your life.

Thomas: That is exactly what is becoming so difficult. This frustration, which goes well beyond precarity and economic crises, sheds light on the difficulty young people in southern Europe and elsewhere encounter in their attempt to create a life which resembles a narrative, which is cumulative, which is coming from somewhere and going somewhere else – a life which consists on more than just standing still at high speed. There is no easy way out, and there can be no return to any pre-existing state of boundaries and stability. Yet the yearning for stability is also not going away.

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Chapter 5

Slow and Fast Academic Life



Abstract From the quality of the curriculum to teaching with technology, responding to student feedback, and following the publishing mantra (publish or perish!), the numerical quantity of publications reporting academic research, and their quality (a journal's ranking) and impact (influence) are turning university life into an academic race against time. Academics take time to produce valid and reliable scientific knowledge, but they also need to take part in an ongoing challenge with academic metrics/rates that means they have to work incessantly. In this scenario, amidst accelerations and cooling down processes, we see the need to slow things down. This is the focus of our sixth conversation, in which we discuss Eriksen's academic history set against the doubts of a young sociologist at the beginning of her career.

A Dark Side of Academia

Martina: I guess our subject today is academic overheating. The dark side of working in the academic world is emerging increasingly clearly. Think of all the debate around the importance of becoming a Slow Academic. I refer specifically to the book *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* by Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, and the Slow Academic debate led by Agnes Bosanquet in Adelaide. I think we can interpret the acceleration in academia as an overheating phenomenon, can't we?

Thomas: Yes, it is one of the best examples we have, certainly for people who work in the academic world. It's one of those overheating effects that really affect our everyday rhythm, that shape our lives in some very unproductive ways. I've been an academic for four decades now. I started my studies 40 years ago, so I've been part of this world since the early 1980s. And since then, there have been some very important changes, which have followed the same pattern as the other forms of overheating that we are seeing in other domains. So we see the bloated, accelerated overcrowding in academia flourishing at the same time as world trade has quadrupled, from 1980 to 2019, and the size of container ships trebled just from 2002 to 2020, and now they're three times as big. One of the most memorable press photos

from recent times, one that made it into newspapers across the world, depicted the container ship Ever Given that got stuck in the Suez Canal during Easter (2021), you saw it, right? ¹ Its size was beyond the wildest imagination to those of us who had never seen one of those monsters close up before. Contemporary container ships are three times as big as they were just 20 years ago. The tendency to scale up has been massive in most of the topics we've spoken about – air traffic, the number of emails you send, the number of gadgets people have, the number of social media users, energy consumption and pollution, species extinction and the loss of biodiversity. Surrounded by all these overheating syndromes, we see academic overheating fitting in snugly and comfortably. There are more academics, more specializations, more journals, conferences and courses, more competition and, I'm afraid, more neoliberalism in academia. The question we may eventually ask is how to make sense of all this. What is the common denominator, the pattern that connects?

Beyond the Ideal Types of Speed and Slowness

Martina: Well, I have a lot of questions. For example, the first one is, are we sure that speed is a bad thing? Because sometimes I think academics see speed in a positive way: speed of publication is a sign of high performativity. The faster you publish, the more positively you are judged by the system. But, the overheating approach seems - in a way - to see speed as a negative element.

Thomas: It's a great question but I think we have to be a bit more specific. We cannot just criticize speed as such. Sometimes it's a good thing to get things done quickly. When you go to a conference, you enjoy listening to the presentations where people get to the point and do so in a structured way. They may only take 15 to 20 min of your time, and they don't go on and on, and on and on, before getting to the point, which is usually a good thing. And it's probably something that we have picked up from the Americans who are very professional when it comes to conference presentations because efficiency is the lifeblood of the American way of life. Young people at good schools learn to make convincing presentations, though they may not learn how to read poetry in the same way as we did. We read a lot of poetry, analyzed classic poems in a lingering way, and that can only be done slowly. Today, this may be less widespread. They may not even learn a lot of European and imperial history, not as much as we did, although they may to some extent compensate with YouTube and Google searches. In my experience, smart Norwegian adolescents know little about the First World War. But they're really professional when it comes to presentations, which sometimes they start doing as quite young children. They

¹In March 2021, the Suez Canal was blocked for 6 days after the grounding of Ever Given, a 20,000 TEU container ship [3]. The 400-metre-long (1300 ft) vessel was buffeted by strong winds on the morning of 23 March, and ended up wedged across the waterway with its bow and stern stuck in the canal banks, blocking all traffic until it could be freed (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Suez_Canal_obstruction).

start to learn to use PowerPoint or something similar and to make presentations in class, to perform in public. Fine, as long as you have something to say.

Moreover, couldn't academic life in the recent past be a bit too slow? People had just too much time and too little pressure, outside the proper elite institutions. At my university, on a Wednesday in February with penetrating sunshine and lots of crisp, white snow, quite a few of the professors would not even be in their offices, since they would be out skiing. That, in my world, is a form of unproductive academic slowness, and it has nothing to do with skiing as such. There is a more constructive slowness movement brewing in academia now, that you alluded to, which is similar to the *città slow* and slow food movement started by Carlo Petrini. The motivation is identical. Slow science is not about laziness, but revolting against a production regime that makes us more competitive than profound and our publications superficial. Just as cooking a juicy and tender *ossobuco* can take half the day, understanding Bourdieu or analysing ethnic relations in Mauritius is not something you can do quickly without losing the substance.

So I do not think that everything slow is good. There is no intrinsic reason why being slow is better than being fast. On the other hand, the law of diminishing returns tends to apply when activities accelerate. The more you get of something, the less the last unit is worth. I mentioned a thirsty person arriving at a cafe earlier; they would be unwilling to pay more than the shop price for the third and fourth bottle – and with academic production, you can also see the law of diminishing returns in the sense that the more conferences you go to, for example, the more workshops you are involved in, the less you're able to invest in each of them, all other things being equal. So that when, in a particular past – say, in the 1970s – academics might typically go to one or two conferences a year, or maybe just one conference. Perhaps there were some smaller workshops, but they were local because travel was expensive and extensive travel was not expected. So you might go to one big gathering in a year, and this meant that you normally spent a few extra days. You got to know people and places quite well as a result. There was no fragmented flurry of faces fleeting by as is the norm at conferences in the North Atlantic world today. One of my old professors became a pen friend of an Australian anthropologist whom he met at a conference somewhere in England in the 1960s. They stayed in contact for many, many years afterwards, meeting physically a few times. Since these events were so rare, each of them was precious. So whether you go to ten conferences a year or 50, each consecutive conference will have less value, all other things being equal. We can talk about teaching along similar lines since something happened with teaching at the university level in the early 2000s with the Bologna reforms. They were intended to streamline study programmes and standardize teaching so that the courses and degrees should be compatible across Europe. So every country which had its own system had to adjust. We all had to produce bachelor's and master's degrees along pretty much the same lines across the continent; in reality, we were told to emulate the British system. This had its costs because most countries had their own, tailor-made study programmes which had evolved slowly on the basis of experience and learning. In my own country, before the Bologna reforms, the system enabled you, for example, to take 1 year of just sociology and then an exam at the

end. Then you learned qualitative and quantitative methods, you got the classics, you learned Marx and Weber, you learned a bit on class and gender inequality, we had a rich curriculum of 4000 pages, plus plenty of time searching for gold in the university library, and then there was one big exam at the end. You could also take a full year of philosophy and a full year of social anthropology – as you’ve guessed, this is what I did – before deciding on what path to pursue. As a result of the Bologna reforms, these coherent one-year units were chopped up into smaller courses, so now students take six courses during a year. As a result, the subject and your knowledge of it get fragmented. You get a less holistic approach to what you’re doing. In anthropology it has become difficult to assign a 250 page monograph to the reading list because it takes up too much of the limited number of pages in a course, whereas when we had 4000 pages spread across 1 year, we could easily assign four or five or six ethnographic monographs, and students had a plenty of slow time because they had a full year before taking an exam. They could sit and look out of the window and read, take notes, whereas now you always have the pressure on you that there’s one or several exams coming up and you need to do well because otherwise you might be in trouble later on. This does not necessarily create a good learning environment, just an accelerated one. Teaching staff teach more; students take more exams; and scholars have to publish more this year than last year. It is neoliberal economic growth applied to a field which is essentially based on different values than efficiency and growth. Back in the 1980s, professors could still sit down and have a coffee with you, unless they were out skiing, that is, since there were fewer of us and less pressure on them. It doesn’t really happen anymore. As I said, if you go to 15, 12 or 10 conferences, each of them will, on the whole, mean less than if you only went to one or two. Similarly, if you publish 10 articles instead of five, you put less work into each of them. So you have this principle, which is now called the salami principle, which has nothing to do with the famous Milanese sausage, incidentally. What a *salame* di Milano and contemporary research have in common, is that they are being cut up into very thin slices, and in the latter case, you can use each of these slices for one publication.

Martina: Yes, by publishing using the whole salami method, but it’s another form of fragmentation. It’s not so easy to manage, to have time to reflect, to find new ideas. It’s quite hard to work in this way.

Thomas: That’s right and, in some branches of sociology, but probably to a greater extent in anthropology and subjects like history, the book length manuscript is considered the gold standard because you need space to let your argument evolve in dialogue with your empirical material, you need time to think through the totality, and you need to be able to provide sufficient context. And it has to be cumulative, so chapter five builds on chapter four, which builds on chapter three. When academics in the humanities and social sciences increasingly produce PhD dissertations which are article-based, this becomes more difficult to achieve because each article has to stand alone, so they’re not cumulative in the same way. A key development in anthropology since the early 1990s may in fact be that many of the books now published, unless they are revised dissertations, seem to be stitched together from articles which were initially published elsewhere. So the long thoughts, the idea that

follows you like a shadow for more than half a page, is being threatened. Sometimes that's fine, and often it's a bad sign. If we consider some of the major works of philosophy from the 18th and 19th centuries, there was only one way in which they could be produced, and that was slowly – according to Nietzsche, philosophizing should be done while walking. Slow walking! They didn't have much by way of diversions. They didn't have many hobbies, correspondence was slow, as was travel, but the good philosopher went for a walk every morning and then sat down with their dusty books, thinking, writing, looking out of the window. So there is something that needs to be said about the harmful effects of acceleration in academia. The salami syndrome in publishing is just one symptom. One should also study, using reliable, that is qualitative, methods, the quality of the articles which are now being spewed out with such frightening frequency by journals – old as well as new. We also need to interrogate the fact that the English language has suddenly become the only game in town. This is good for quantity and metrics in the Anglophone world, but very negative for originality, eloquence, diversity and justice. So many of us are forced to publishing in our second or third language – if all your publications are in Italian, you simply don't exist on the international stage. A growth in quantity, a loss of diversity, that's the most palpable overheating effect of uncontrolled growth in academia.

Martina: Yes and sometimes I think that – even if a person seems to have a good *curriculum vitae* – sometimes it's quite boring and I think I have a conversation with a little box of technical theory, so.., this is only my experience, you can never really have a conversation with a person and his or her scientist soul but only with his or her jargon. . .so I think acceleration in academia is a bad thing.

Thomas: Absolutely, yes, and there is more to be said about this too. It may be about time that the humanities and qualitative social sciences of the universities represent ourselves loudly and clearly as a counterculture. De facto, we represent an alternative set of values as opposed to the values of overheated neoliberalism and new public management. Increased efficiency and speed can be excellent, but there is a time and a place for everything, and an essay is not a pair of slippers, any more than a collection of conversations about overheated globalization is a pound of flesh to be measured, weighed, valued and compared with other commodities. It's a good thing to have a more efficient production in waste recycling and postal deliveries, and there are lots of areas where speeding up would be good. There are also good arguments for doing things more efficiently for the sake of it; I have the boring, filthy and necessary work in mind. Let's try to make it as painless as possible. But the kind of thing that we do in universities follows a different logic because knowledge is created out of nought, or rather, it is the product of time, knowledge, intelligence, engagement and fresh air. It can be tempting to compare university life to life in a monastery. Ideally, you're on your own in your office and you have few interruptions except coffee and lunch breaks. You discuss with colleagues while breaking bread with them, reading, thinking and taking notes. This is often how new ideas come into the world, and it has to be done in that way. It's the same with the students. I sometimes tell undergraduate students that they should be aware of having entered a countercultural place which represents the opposite of the smartphone and the

shopping mall. It's not snippets. It's not fragments. It's not fast food or fast fashion. In order to get anything out of your studies, you have to really sit down and concentrate and it's hard work, and it can be incredibly boring, but it will be rewarding in the end.

We also need to question overheated academic publishing. It has become a crazy, demented treadmill churning out thousands of articles every day which nobody is meant to read, but which are intended for people's CVs, enabling them to apply for work. Instead of prizing quantity, we should ask job applicants to submit their three best texts with the application and forget the rest.

Being a Production Worker in the Sausage Factory of Academia

Martina: It's incredible that we keep going on writing and writing a lot. What is the point? It doesn't make sense to write and write in this way.

Thomas: No, it doesn't, and it's like being production worker in the sausage factory. It's like wow, look at him. He's got so many publications. OK, I concede that I am in the glass house in this because I publish a lot myself, because writing is my way of moving ahead with my thinking. But I have very mixed feelings about it, and I'm not proud of the quantity, fully aware that most of what you do will have no impact. Perhaps many of my publications are mainly for internal use.

Allow another brief comparison with the 1960s and 1970s, before the computer revolution. I said that people might typically go to maybe one conference a year because it was expensive. Many of these professor types who were typically born in the 1920s and 1930s published very little. The odd book review, well, an article now and then, maybe a little article every 5 years. Even the famous anthropologist Fredrik Barth, whose biography I wrote just before he died in 2016, was not hugely prolific, and he described himself as lazy. He might publish three articles 1 year, perhaps two articles the next. Then a book eventually appeared, and that book would be thorough, smart, original, in short high-octane work. The ability to write slowly, but also to digest the things that other people had written, was taken for granted. There is something profoundly unhealthy about the current situation. Perhaps we should suggest a rule for academics. You have an upper limit of 200 pages a year. When you reach that threshold, you have to wait until next year before placing your next little missive out there.

Martina: Oh yes! It's a good idea because growth is clearly not good for thinking, this kind of growth, because it also makes us read more superficially because you want to keep abreast of your field, right? You don't read maybe even the important articles or books as thoroughly as you should because there are so many other things that you should do. So, instead of encouraging more growth, we should do the opposite. Encourage less. Less is more. So, for example, how many conferences do you attend every year now?

Thomas: Good question. During the pandemic, things have been a bit different but, that said, before the pandemic maybe three big conferences and seven or eight smaller international workshops or symposia, Perhaps 11 events altogether. And the thing is that, following each of these events, you usually have to produce something because the organizers want to make a special issue or maybe an edited volume. It's a rule. This means that, in my case, quite often I produce 14, 15, 16 academic articles in a year which have been more or less commissioned. It should have been more like four or five.

Martina: Maybe this is because you are an academic rock star. I mean you are quite 'famous' in the anthropological world.

Thomas: Not so much. It's really a part of a larger system with its inner logic.

Martina: But, my opinion - I don't know your viewpoint about it - is that it's structural. It's a structural problem.

Thomas: That's true. We've been co-opted by the same value system that leads to overheated growth in the economy – it is an example of what Habermas many years ago spoke of as the colonization of life-worlds. Perhaps, like some other social theorists, we could argue the need to distinguish between culture, politics and economy, which are based on distinct value systems. The economy – production, distribution, consumption – prioritises efficiency, while values guiding politics could be deliberative democracy in negotiations, compromises, that kind of thing, whereas in culture, there has to be a third way – a third set of values which are distinctive from those of politics and economy. So it should be autonomous and the scientific world, the academic world will be part of the cultural world, which should be based on different values. The sociologist Daniel Bell once described himself as socialist in economic matters, liberal politically, and culturally conservative. In accordance with complex systems thinking, inspired by people like Gregory Bateson, Niklas Luhmann and Edgar Morin, each subsystem in society should be regulated by a distinct value system. Having a market-dominated university is quite damaging for the reasons we've been talking about. To a great extent, we may blame the expansionist growth ambitions inherent in capitalism. But there is another dimension as well, which also fits with globalization or overheating, namely homogenization and standardization. Nowadays, there's really just one game in town, and it's Anglophone. As mentioned, if you don't publish in English, you become marginal, which is a serious problem, not least in a country like Italy, where you have a very big domestic intellectual public sphere. In a smaller country like Norway, it's less of a problem because we're so used to having to use foreign languages in order to communicate. But this all leads to a flattening standardization. The political theorist Benedict Anderson, famous for his book about nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (Anderson, 1983) later wrote a beautiful book called *Under Three Flags* (Anderson, 2005) which is really about what he calls early globalization in the late nineteenth century. It's about anarchists and freedom fighters in the colonies. One of his main characters is José Rizal from the Philippines, a famous freedom fighter in the Philippines. He died very young, yet there are statues of him all around the Philippine cities. And Rizal communicated in at least four different languages, Spanish, English, French and German. He also learned some Russian in

order to be able to correspond with Trotsky. So, as Anderson says, a little more than a hundred years ago, it was considered necessary for an intellectual to command several languages. At the same time, and since we're talking about the processes of overheating, it's a logic that we are seeing now in academia, that there's less diversity, but there's more in terms of quantity. It is demented, demoralizing and destructive.

Martina: It's quite crazy here too, but it's - I don't know how to explain it, because maybe over the years you'll know it's the political system really embedded in the university system. So sometimes, yes, it's crazy, but the most important thing is that you have the right political contractor, to have a good evaluation of your projects so that you can have the funding.

Thomas: Well, yes, in Italy, this would be an important factor. But when you apply for funding from Brussels, you just compete with everybody else, and that may be the most counterproductive aspect of academic overheating. Is this a sort of racket or the treadmill of the funding applications? Because, when you compare the amount of work that is put into each of these applications, including the evaluation committees and so on; and the number of applications that eventually get funded, you come to realize that it is a perverse and objectionable situation. We clearly spend more resources and time writing these applications and getting them evaluated, much more energy and time and money on this than on the actual research. A friend of mine who recently passed away was the sociolinguist Jan Blommaert. He was among the most prolific and original in his field, and told me that he was involved in one of those research applications some years ago. In the end, they didn't get funded in spite of their best efforts and a huge expenditure of resources, both human and economic. Blommaert decided to look more closely at the results, and it turned out that 98.5% of the applications under that program were not funded. Confronted with such numbers, you may ask yourself: Do I really want to do this again? You see what I mean.

Martina: Oh, yes. I was thinking that, some years ago, you won an important project ERC about overheating. It's the most famous funding for a foreign researcher.

Thomas: And it's hugely competitive. It's enormously competitive. So, I don't know exactly how it works, but you've got to have a bit of luck to get it. I mean, you have to be good, but there are lots of good people who never get the Advanced Grant for various reasons. So that's a typical example, but we see it locally as well. A few years ago, the Research Council of Norway a few years ago, they moved into new premises in a pretty large office block with room for hundreds of employees in a good location, and keep in mind that the only thing they do is manage research funding. For the record, I should add that of course, many excellent, devoted people work in such places. The problem is structural.

Martina: Hundreds of people, yes. It's an important dimension about everything. Well, I think we lack a little piece of the puzzle. It's the other side. What are the alternatives? For example, I would like to become a slow academic level scholars, but it's not so simple because to become a slow academic is a privilege. Only if you are a 10 years old tenure track or if you have a tenure track position, you can slow.

What do you think about it? It's a privilege because at certain times, for example, now I have a postdoc fellowship and a girl that is working for me, and she works a lot for me. And it's important because she thinks things better. I have no time to do so.

Thomas: Exactly, which is wonderful in a way, but - to begin with yourself - if we look at the sort of demographic development of the academic disciplines, it's easy to see that there are far more of us now than there were three generations ago, but the number of jobs hasn't really grown accordingly. Put simply, and using Thomas Malthus's terminology, we may say that the number of jobs have grown arithmetically - 1, 2, 3, 4 etc.; while the number of really clever people with PhDs has grown geometrically - 1, 2, 4, 8 etc. In this kind of situation, what exactly should you do if you want to be a slow academic? I think, to be honest, that being a slow academic is probably a privilege reserved for those who already have a tenured job. I would not dare to recommend a struggling postdoctoral fellow, precariously employed, to join the Slow Science movement. Not yet. But we could also try to reform the system a bit from within, for example, by emphasizing public science, doing other things than strictly speaking research, I mean, given that much of this research has limited impact anyway. So why not instead give some points to people who have or do other things? I mean, they may have a podcast, or they have a blog or they do other things. And what about teaching? Isn't that one of the most important things we do? It is becoming increasingly clear that some of my research hasn't really taken off in the way I had been hoping, but at least I know that I have talked to several thousand students over the years, and they're all over society, some of them in the private sector, some in the public sector, some in higher education and research. And they've all learned a bit of anthropology, and I sometimes meet some of them who have gone on to do other things, and it's quite clear that they learned something that has been valuable in their lives. This is gratifying.

Slow vs Fast Academia

Martina: As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Agnes Bosanquat wrote an article about the emerging of Slow Academia. I don't share everything about this approach, but in my opinion some rules are important who would live in a better way, for example, write fewer emails, your files or, for example, talk about and support a strategy. It's important, I think, to speak with your DNA about how to organize in a better way the whole work of the department, teaching, students' problems, and so on. I think we can take care (talk?) about a different culture, maybe a counterculture from the inside, and about reforming it from the inside with little steps.

Thomas: Yes, and then we could also take good breaks. In general, it is necessary to find the right balance between speed and slowness, working with and for others and delving into your own research - and working versus not working. That's the point. Doing something for your colleagues is an important part of the academic gift economy, and we should try to avoid counting and measuring the amount of effort

we put into refereeing and so on. Doing something for other people is a very important part of what we do and which makes it different from production, economic production in general. Yet another thing when you talk about it supports those strategies. What we could do is to find some exemplary persons from the past who have had a major impact on intellectual life and who didn't produce very much. Take Albert Einstein. He produced three articles around 1907. They were the main sources of his fame. He did write more later on, but these were the source of the theory of relativity. Another example is the anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's aforementioned nephew, a great influence on our discipline, but he never published a book, only essays. You don't always have to write a lot. That's the point. There are other ways of going about things in research. Sometimes, we just have to do things slowly. Claude Lévi-Strauss took several years to rethink kinship relations towards the end of his wartime exile in the USA. He then came up, few years later, with a book that changed our thinking about kinship permanently.

Martina: It's a really good idea, thank you, thank you. OK, last but not least, the question is about the future of the modern university. According to new and modern universities that are coming to an end or not, this starting point, OK, my research on accelerated biographies, and for this conversation, I found, for example, a lot of books about some colleagues of dark academia and toxic academia and so on. So I was thinking, maybe university is coming to an end. What is emerging, what? Well, I don't know. Maybe there's a magic in the form of university.

Thomas: There is a lot of pessimism. But perhaps that's part of the job of being a social theorist, you have to be able to deal with pessimism in order to see alternatives. We cannot a priori assume that things are improving through some kind of magic. At the moment, there are two kinds of enormous structural changes that are shaping the world, which weren't visible in the same way 15 to 20 years ago. The first is climate and the environment, and the other is digitalization in a broad sense, leading to unintended side-effects such as interruptions, distractions, concentration loss and so on, which is washing over our culture. Both are serious to the extent of having apocalyptic potentialities, but in different ways – they represent two extremes in the overheating paradigm. It's hard not only to get students to read long texts any more, but it's even hard to get yourself to read long texts. And this does something to the depth of learning. We benefit, we gain a lot regarding breadth because we get such a good overview of lots of little things, but we lose when it comes to depth and proper understanding of the long here and the big now, the processes that connect us. A younger colleague of mine has organized a reading group with some master's students, where they are told just to leave their phones at the entrance on the shelf, and then to sit in the seminar room and read a book for 4 or 5 h. As one of them reported afterwards, this was incredibly difficult. She described the experience as having been painful, horrible and boring in the beginning. But then, after an hour or so, when you've forced yourself, you get into a different rhythm. This is what we have to aim at. It isn't impossible, but we are up against major forces pulling us away from this particular way, from a simplistic knowledge regime according to which all knowledge should be immediately 'useful', to powerful economic interests that

benefit from screen addiction. In order to resist this tendency efficiently, we need to recover ways of thinking collectively.

Martina: I totally agree with you, but it seems so impossible. Well, I'll think about it. Thomas, even today, lots of food for my brain, for thought. Many, many thanks.

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Chapter 6

Rage Days



Abstract There has been a perceptible shift from class politics to identity politics in the last few decades, and this is not just the case in the North Atlantic world – from Trump to Orban, from Brexit to Salvini and more recently Meloni. Unlike in the postwar decades, Indian politics are to a great extent defined through *hindutva*, Hindu nationalism, as a centre of gravity; contemporary Chinese political rhetoric does not delve into the virtues of Communism as much as it glorifies the history and current achievements of the great Chinese nation; in African societies, conceptualizations of autochthony – first-comers – have become important aspects of rights claims in ways that were unknown until recently, and similar tendencies can be discerned in Latin America as well. Politicized nostalgia and an eagerness to build walls, physical and virtual, against the impurities and contaminations of the outside world, are pitted against an enthusiasm for openness, free trade and cultural exchanges, sometimes aligned with cosmopolitan values and inclusive forms of humanism whereby the rights of migrants and cultural minorities are defended on universalist grounds. In other words, people in otherwise very different societies raise strikingly similar questions about who they are and what that entails. In rapidly changing surroundings, the answers are fraught with controversy, often pitting ambivalence and doubt against withdrawal and reassertions of boundaries. The Overheating approach represents a perspective on identity which aims to take previous theorising a step further. Shifting, multiple, contested and unstable social identities that hold out a promise to form the basis for a meaningful sense of belonging are taken as a starting point, not as a conclusion, and they are viewed through the lens of accelerated change. It is as if modernity shifted to a higher gear towards the end of the twentieth century.

Loosing Control in Our Daily Life

Thomas: There is a sense of a loss of control and also that the situation in which people live is unpredictable and can be difficult to deal with. It changes so quickly; just think about the way the pandemic forced us to reorient ourselves and change our lives from 1 day to the next. The pandemic offers some excellent examples of this

uncertainty. it was only yesterday that I learned that if my plane from abroad had arrived just one and a half hours later, I would have had to take a test and wait, possibly for hours, to get out. This is a trivial example, but living with this kind of fundamental uncertainty and the feeling that 'they' are doing this to 'me' again with no forewarning, gives a feeling of being overrun, of the small scale clashing impotently with the large scale. Why didn't anybody ask me, you may ask; those idiots know nothing about us, ordinary people struggling to get by, since they sit smugly in their offices somewhere far away with their fat salaries and big houses. This kind of rage, which is related to the populist rage that we see across Europe now and also elsewhere, suggests that there are there are certain elites who make decisions about their lives and they're not qualified to do it and they don't really care about us. This gives a context for understanding the massive demonstrations in the Netherlands and Italy against Covid restrictions. The anti-vaccine movement is quite complex, it is not merely a right-wing movement fuelled by mistrust of experts and government. But the motivation is shared across the board. Many feel that government is deliberately messing up their lives by prohibiting ordinary and quite important activities. Funerals in many countries are big events, and not showing up can be risky both socially and spiritually – yet, there has been an upper limit of 50, for example in South Africa. But more mundane activities are also being disturbed. In my family, we organize a big dinner party on Boxing Day every year, with lots of good food and drink, with my brother, our auntie and uncle, my cousins and their children, so we could easily be up to 25 or 30 people. This year [2021] we do not seem to be able to do it, just like last year. Someone else has taken the decision for us. It is a loss, but we learn from it.

Martina: Yes, The feeling is that just is not enough. I mean, there's no democratic control. They just taking decisions in some government office. And I have to pay the bill. and that's a recipe for the kind of rage that we're interested in, we don't we no longer in control of our own lives. We don't know what we don't know.

Thomas: Yeah, that's right. As late as I think this August, one of the leading health spokesmen for the Ministry of Health over here concluded that the pandemic was over. They seemed to have made exactly the same mistake in the Czech Republic in July last year, 2020, when they had a big public feast, with food and drink, decking out the Charles Bridge, the famous bridge crossing the Vltava in Central Prague, with a long table with a festive tablecloth and hundreds of people eating and drinking beer and, you know, basically having a good time. And then 2 months later, the Czech Republic was on top of the of the European list of Covid infections. So there is a real feeling of losing control and not knowing what will happen next. And as you say, we don't know what we don't know. It can be frustrating and painful. But we need to get used to it, not mainly concerning pandemics, but there is a need to make peace with uncertainty in general. The basic epistemology and self-understanding has to change. The standard individualist model of selfhood in our kind of society tells us that we are autonomous subjects capable of taking decisions on our own, and it needs to be oriented towards a more ecological outlook where you know that you are part of a much larger network, and things can happen in certain parts of that network with immediate effects on me

because I am part of the system without taking all the decisions in it. That's one of the main points I wanted to make a little while ago, when I said that some of those webs of connectedness of globalization are becoming visible for the first time simply because they're no longer functioning, teaching us about the limits of individualism. So it is through their absence that we can see them and appreciate their importance. There are simply certain important decisions that are not for me to take, since I am vulnerable, dependent and weak. This is one main reason why the neoliberal ideology suddenly seems less attractive. It told you that you were in command, you could do whatever you liked, and it encouraged us to do as much as possible for the sake of our own self-realization: travel, consume, work, produce, contribute to economic growth from 1 day to the next. Suddenly, we were told the opposite: Stay at home. Do as little as possible. The shops are going to be closed anyway, so shopping is not an option. Don't go to work. Go for a walk in your neighborhood if you have to. But if you can, stay at home, do as little as you can, and be the opposite of the ideal neoliberal prosumer.

Martina: I see, maybe we can try to connect the pandemic rage with populism. It's not really my research theme, but I think Pandemic left a memories on our agency and we have to deal with it. without forgetting what it was. How can we read and interpret this feeling?

Thomas: Yes, I think you are right, and we should look for pattern resemblances and connections. And it's because it's a result of these frictions. The contradictions they refer to have not been fully understood unless the friction between the system-world and the life-world leads to real consequences subsequently. We may well respond with anger and even violence if we have no other ways of channeling our protest. When the usual democratic tools are not functioning, we will begin to rummage for alternatives in the depths of the toolbox. This is a risky exercise both for the searchers and those around them, as the new populisms have reminded us. But in a way, there is an historical irony in the fact that at a certain level, the pandemic did not lead to further overheating in the physical world, but people's emotions continued to heat up almost in a dialectical negation of the physical deceleration.

Martina: Yeah, absolutely. . . if cooled down a cooling down is an answer, but now we don't see the world is cooling down. So our world always seems to be in a constant collapse, as if it has a fever and you can't get the temperature down.

Thomas: Yes, exactly. So, the pandemic is an overheating phenomenon *par excellence*; it was the most global event in the history of humanity, and it spread with lightning speed. It epitomizes global connectedness and also shows how the small scale articulates with large scale in ways which we are only partly able to understand. We are going to live with the consequences for a long time, not least for the just-in-time logistic chains of the global economy, but it also affects the fragile ties connecting people to each other and the institutions of society. Every week [in 2022], the press prints articles about failing supply chains and how they still haven't managed to sort out the economy, getting the wheels of the economy to roll smoothly like in the recent past. And so there is currently a call in the business community for more heat in the economy in order to ensure continued growth. This

is not currently happening. Instead, you get heat somewhere else, namely in the emotions of dissatisfied people who feel that they have not been taken seriously and are made to suffer unnecessarily.

Populist Rage

Martina: You're right but perhaps we should talk more about the populist rage. I was wondering if you see something or a connection between populism and the pandemic. Maybe social rage is only the other side of the same coin of the crisis in which we were immersed before the pandemic.

Thomas: Exactly. The pandemic is interesting in itself, but perhaps even more relevant as a symbol of something more fundamental to do with the social contract between citizens, and between people and government. Only in the last few years, these ties have unravelled at frightening speed. Think about the shift to authoritarian Hindu politics in India, which was a haven of liberalism and pluralism just a few years ago; or the craziness of US politics during and after Trump. One of the first measurable responses in the States after the outbreak of the pandemic was a growth in the sales of firearms and ammunition. The instinctive reaction of millions of Americans was that if a serious crisis ensued, they would have to defend themselves against their neighbours. In a sane society, they would instead have thought about ways to collaborate and help each other through the crisis. This did also happen; the US is a big and diverse place. In other parts of the world, such as Europe, firearm sales did not increase. This says something about trust, that very fundamental concept for social theory, and we have to take another look at trust in a minute.

Let's try to take a step back and think about a way to frame the rise of populism, a family of ideologies feeding on suspicion and distrust, as an outcome of accelerated change in a world *fuori controllo*, to use the excellent Italian title of my *Overheating* book. Just as Brexit and Trump were happening, the Indian intellectual Pankaj Mishra published an excellent book called *Age of Anger* (Mishra, 2017). One of the most impressive things about Mishra is his lack of formal training in the history of ideas or philosophy. He has a natural science degree, so he is entirely self-taught in this field. Perhaps this is why he is such an original thinker, since nobody had told him how to read Nietzsche and Sartre, he just got on with it on his own.

Mishra argues that the anti-modern impulse that fuels contemporary populism and xenophobia can be traced back at least to Rousseau in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The feeling nurtured is one of alienation, that modernity is too large scale, too committed to change, too disruptive of old traditions and hierarchies, too much of a threat to the world in which you feel at home. The view is that modernity takes us away from our authentic being, and places too much power in the hands of the wrong people. He then shows how this anti-modern impulse can be identified in lots of places; a yearning for the authentic, simple and just world before the chaos and impurities of the contemporary world took over with its filth, cosmopolitans, cities and impenetrable complexity. Mishra moves historically through the

nineteenth century and the twentieth, ending with hindutva and similar movements. A big paradox is that several of these anti-modern movements now [2022] hold formal power, from Brazil to the United States, which is paradoxical because they started as anti-elite movements. In India, the Hindu nationalists of the BJP have been in power now for 20–30 years. So Hindutva has transformed itself into a formal political entity, just like the post-truth incarnation of the Republican party. What is curious about this shift is that the people who were feeding on suspicion against politics and politicians, were now the ones who were running the country. Let us also keep in mind that what we think of as populism has a long history, and it has many faces, not all of them reactionary or based on suspicion and prejudice. The Four Star movement in your own country is ambiguous in this respect, just as Peronism in Argentina; and Podemos in Spain is a left-wing populist movement. What they have in common is the feeling that ‘the people’ – whoever that is – are losing out and that the changes of modernity to do with urbanization, industrialization and so on are generally bad news, because they take away some of the power and autonomy that ‘ordinary people’ used to have. Some would even add that it also takes away our soul.

In any case, the opposition to modernity is complex and cannot be reduced merely to populism and Fascism. Take Germany and its strong green movement, for example. Only yesterday, as I was walking through the city where I am currently staying, in Halle near Leipzig, I passed several little ecological shops where they sold organic food and advertised that everything was ‘natural’. In other words, these products are pure, they are uncontaminated, and we can see this outlook as part of a general frame of mind. It’s harmless as long as it restricts itself to organic smoothies and pesticide-free cauliflowers, but the underlying yearning for purity and simplicity and naturalness is something that easily morphs into something different and nastier. It is not without a certain interest that the anti-vaxxers in Germany are the largest group of their kind in Europe; 30% has been mentioned by German social scientists as an estimate. Some of those people are the usual suspects, people who don’t trust the government on principle. But then you have some very different anti-vaxxers, ecologically minded people who are suspicious of the big pharmaceutical industry, often for good reason. Nobody knows what the giant companies put into these vaccines, and it may be something that is actually very harmful for you and me. They’re not natural, and so on, and those companies are motivated by profit-seeking, not truth or health. The rational, but cynical logic of the pharmaceutical industry and the complacent governments letting them have their way can then be contrasted with natural medicine, organic food and a healthy, rooted way of life. In this way, the anti-vaxxing argument can be coopted by versions of antimodern populism, but I should emphasize that there are worse examples. Think of the so-called conspiracy theories – so-called because they scarcely deserve the designation ‘theory’ – about where this virus is coming from. Some continue to deny that it ever existed, claiming that it’s a hoax. Trump even had the nerve to intimate that it was something invented in China mainly to make life difficult for Americans. There is stupidity and ignorance in such statements, but in a post-truth, post-trust society, they are potentially powerful by suggesting that there are secret, evil forces that pull

the threads and that try to take away what little power we have left over our lives. So I think there is there is a clear sort of similarity that the general sort of lack of trust in modernity. Climate change deniers fit into the same template.

Simple Answers to Complex Questions

Martina: Yeah and it's impossible to manage these movements. They are so paradoxical movement and they seems to be against everything, everything about a scientific method to. You know, Galileo would be angry with them (laughing).

Thomas: Yes, but this kind of world-view is not motivated by a search for truth; perhaps, when our descendants look back at the twenty-first century, their most serious accusation will be that this was the time when civilization lost its way because it ceased believing in truth. At the same time, the reaction is understandable, since we all try to make sense of our worlds – as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz said, the human need for meaning is as pressing as the need for food and sleep – and it is incredibly difficult to know what to believe and who to trust. So what do you do? This is also an overheating effect in the realm of knowledge complexity: What do you do when the world becomes so impenetrably complex that you don't even know where to begin to make sense of it? It can be an irresistible temptation to search for simple answers. In general, in this day and age, there's a great demand for simple answers to complex questions.

Let me elaborate a little bit. We see this in academia, where there was a surge in this kind of demand at around the same time as we started to talk about global complexity in the early 1990s, incidentally at the same time that postmodernism, which we should see largely as an aesthetic and philosophical movement and not a search for truth, flourished in parts of the academy. There were certain evolutionary explanations, simplifications of the Darwinist perspectives, which argued that everything had an evolutionary origin and could easily be understood with a handful of basic, rough conceptual tools. This came as a great relief to many because it meant that they wouldn't have to read all these difficult authors, from Adorno to Zizek. You could just read a bit of selfish-gene Darwinism, starting with Richard Dawkins, and then you'd soon have all the answers you needed. The complexity of mindboggling questions is pared down to some robust questions concerning adaptation, competition and natural selection. Simple answers are offered to complex questions.

Similarly, from another cultural world, let us assume that climate change is affecting your community of Quechua speakers in the Andes. In the community I have in mind, studied by my former postdoc Astrid Stensrud, water was about to become a commodity whereas it had always been managed collectively, in common. Suddenly, there was a drought, and so there wasn't enough water to water the quinoa fields. A mine had opened its operations next door, and mines are notorious for using a lot of water. So they went over to the mine and said, Look, you are probably hogging the water, and we want compensation' ... I'm sorry. It's my cat. You hear him in the background ... he's coming to disturb us now.

(Thomas goes to cuddle the cat and introduce him to me)

Thomas: Anyway, what the mining executives said was that they felt sorry for the villagers, but the water shortage was not their fault, but should be blamed on climate change. So what should the villagers do when the problem had suddenly been scaled up from something manageable to something incomprehensible? They resorted to traditional remedies, such as making sacrifices to the Earth Goddess, Pachamama. They found a manageable answer to an impossibly complex question.

A universal human desire consists in relating big events in the world and complex processes to our own experiences. You start with your own experiences. A number of years ago, the son of a friend of mine was getting into bad company, right-wing nasties who resented immigrants and had unhealthy views of the working class, women and the elites that were ostensibly running the country. This young man, luckily, eventually got out of it and became a very decent and pleasant young man with some remarkable skills to show for himself. The point is that he had had some very unpleasant experiences as an adolescent, with gangs of Somali youths assaulting other teenagers on the metro train. They were robbing middle-class kids from the affluent part of the city, taking their mobile phones or even their expensive jackets, that kind of thing. So he said that, for years afterwards, whenever he saw a Somali or someone who looked Somali on the street, he would move to the other side of the street. His fear was not intellectual, but visceral and embodied. And based on his experiences, he began to generalize about black people and saw the tolerant multiculturalists in his parents' network as the enemy who had understood nothing of the real world. They – or should I say we – didn't care because they were not exposed to the danger, while the people at the sharp end of the stick were left with the bill, obliged to pay for the negligence and indifference of the complacent middle classes parading as multiculturalist tolerance. Eventually, this argument, which we have to take seriously, is expanded into the unfounded assumption that people with a majority identity lose their jobs because of competition from immigrants, and that dark-skinned men routinely rape or seduce their white women as well. There is a certain internal logic to that argument, you have to concede as much. And the way to break out of it is by shifting your gaze to other contradictions in society, making it more complex and pointing out that well, this does happen occasionally, but it is not about culture or race but mainly about exclusion, class and inequality. One could also add that we're just talking about a few people who are tainting the reputation of the whole community. And if you really want to look at exploitation and inequality, look for causes and not mere symptoms. However, the trump card (or Trump card) of the anti-moderns is their ability to relate events to people's tangible experiences. Any social analysis becomes credible only when you can relate your own experiences to it. But it is somewhat puzzling that populists always tend to attack politicians and intellectuals, much more rarely the rich and the corporations which are the ones who are actually responsible for their current problems.

Toxic Masculinity

Think for example about gender. Much of the rage that we see is male. Masculinity, xenophobia and anti-modern sentiments offer a powerful cocktail when trust in society is failing, as depicted in the Mad Max films and other post-apocalyptic narratives. So part of the motivation underlying the rage we see is the feeling that we now live in a much a very feminized society, where we talk incessantly about our problems instead of acting in the physical world, and where being a ‘real man’ is ethically objectionable. For the time being, there’s not much public violence in our European societies, compared to nearly any previous historical period. So it has become difficult to express certain forms of masculinity in a way which is not sneered at. Tellingly, one of the stereotypes about the elites consists in their being effeminate; but it remains a fact that it is difficult to channel your masculinity in a legitimate way. You can do it when you watch a football game with your mates, perhaps, but even then, it doesn’t last long. If we consider the young people who were recruited to the so-called Islamic State in the Middle East, we must ask about their motivation. Many of them didn’t know much about Islam. Some of them even had to run into a W.H. Smith and buy, covertly, books like *Islam for Dummies* when changing flights at Schiphol. So it wasn’t really about religion, but about being a man and being respected and getting some recognition for being a real macho capable of beheading others; you know, growing a beard and being this strong, silent and dangerous character. Almost exact parallels can be seen among the more militant anti-immigrant groups in Europe. They should not be underestimated. Some of them are highly educated. I know people who have become militant Islamophobes, but who started out as respectable academics, usually with a misogynist streak, but even so. Some of them produce regular columns in online newspapers or popular websites dedicated to criticising the ills of the modern mess of creolization and multiculturalism. Then there are the more moderate people, who are against identity politics in universities, who accuse the decolonial project of being anti-scientific, who take a negative view of multiculturalism and who generally believe that Darwinist explanations can give you all the answers you need. These ideas very often come together in a package; it is a kind of positivism on amphetamines, certainly with a strong masculinist bias shouting its heresies rather than whispering its doubts. Doubt is for weaklings, certainty is strength.

Martina: It’s a good common point, and it’s interesting. I have to study something about it so, thanks for your overview, I never thought there could be a connection between that rage and masculinity.

Coming to Trust as a Fundamental Concept

Thomas: Well, thank you for helping us clarify our thoughts. But before we end, we should say something more about trust, which is a concept that has hovered over this conversation and which is also fundamental to classic social theory; I need not remind you that you still have a bust of Durkheim peering at you with a slightly worried air. So let's think comparatively about trust in the light of runaway, overheated globalization and the pandemic experience as a symptom. And why not begin with this particular chronotype: the wealthy, stable society, with no social conflicts to speak of, where I live and work. Around here, the integration between state and citizens is typically quite close and peaceful, and the pandemic has not weakened it perceptibly for the majority of the population. It is a common belief among Norwegians that the state can provide the services they need, and that the police can help them if they get into trouble. This, I don't have to remind you, is not the case for an African-American in St. Louis or a freethinker in Pakistan.

Trust comes in two sizes, Small and Large. You can trust, and act in solidarity with, a *who*, that is other people, and it usually helps if you know them, and in many societies if you are related through kinship or marriage. Personal networks are far from unknown in Norway either, and their importance is greatly underestimated in general, not least in the labour market; so there is a cultural notion that people are mostly treated equally. Studies which suggest that Americans and South Africans have a generally low level of trust in each other, indicate that most Scandinavians believe that other people can mostly be trusted.

You can also rely on a *what*, an institution, which is faceless and bureaucratic, and which can be manned by anyone. A minimum of trust in a *what* is necessary to be able to handle a crisis collectively in a large-scale society, since it is institutions such as the health care system, the press, ministries and research institutions that stand as guarantors that the crisis is framed in the most rational way possible. This is not something you can take for granted. In Mauritius, all businesses were closed by government decree in March 2020, including supermarkets and bakeries. Just a few hours after the ban was announced, the first break-in at a grocery store was reported. The state's legitimacy was already low among certain groups in the ethnically diverse and class-divided Mauritian society, and it was not exactly strengthened by an injunction that was perceived as impractical, ill-thought and unreasonable.

In Scandinavia, people pay high income tax in the tacit confidence that at least some of the money will be used sensibly by a faceless bureaucracy. The difference should not be exaggerated – here, too, it is an advantage to know someone; it is not just here that the state finances the schools and the health service, and corruption is not unknown up here either – but there is no doubt that the difference is noticeable and measurable. So the trust both in a *what* and in a *who* was put to the test, and it revealed some pretty deep differences between societies. The rise of populism and pandemic rage that we've been talking about cannot be understood independently of this diversity. And yet ... we also have our populists up here, so nobody is inoculated against this global virus. Unlike the Covid virus, populism was not first detected in a

market in Wuhan, but that other virus certainly helped spread it. I think we'll have to talk about a third kind of virus as well – the virus of the algorithms – but it is time for a break. My cat needs to be fed, and I need a cup of tea. A presto!

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Chapter 7

Living in a Digital World



Abstract It just took a little over a decade for the smartphone to conquer the world following its introduction on the world market in 2007. Just 15 years later, this ubiquitous device had virtually become an extension of the body for hundreds of millions of people. In this conversation, we explore some of the ways in which temporality has been affected by the penetration of the smartphone into people's life-worlds. The smartphone has affected the rhythms of everyday life. Formerly, appointments would typically be made days or weeks ahead. No micro-adjustment was possible, whereas it is now common, and has entered into everyday routines in European cities, to send a text if one is a little late for an encounter. Before this possibility existed, there was a need for greater flexibility. Conversely, you were free when you were not in and available, and allowed to fill the temporal gaps with anything or nothing. The temporal flexibility was, in other words, greater before the mobile internet, while the spatial flexibility has increased.

Martina: We have talked a lot about speed so far, and there is another aspect I would like to go into with you: the platformization of the world in which we live. You also wrote a book about apps recently (Eriksen, 2022). What is the connection between world of platforms and the overheating approach?

Thomas: We are immersed in platforms, marinated in algorithms, and there is definitely a very strong link between the huge development that has occurred in platforms and apps and the acceleration of technological developments. But then there are many ways in which we can frame the phenomenon. We talk about platformization, but the studies using that term are still very fragmented and often tentative. But certainly interesting, although they respond to different sets of questions. My book, called 'Planet of the Apps', mainly takes a phenomenological approach, emphasising global and local diversity in the use of smartphones and how they make life both freer and more constrained. Others focus on corporate power, surveillance and standardization. These questions need to be asked separately in order to avoid muddled thinking. The world of algorithms and mobile communication is multifaceted, and to begin with, it is important not to mix the levels even if both are overheating phenomena coming from the same source. Let's be a bit more specific. So platformization represents a multifaceted transformation of globalized

societies thanks to the Internet and the affordable, now almost ubiquitous devices that connect the world. It is really quite important to understand how platformization works and to create new imaginaries that help re-design relations at all levels, not least to salvage personal and interpersonal autonomy. In all this we are always immersed in the platforms thanks to the smartphone which has become an extension of our bodies at an astonishing speed. And we have to deal with this every day. There is no simple answer to the question whether we become dumber or smarter because of the smartphone. But certainly its uses from an anthropological point of view should always be studied from below and within to begin with, taking users – which include you and me, and more than four billion others – seriously. There is great diversity; the smartphone adds something to your life, it removes something; it magnifies something else, and so on, but your use of the apps will necessarily build on and articulate with your pre-smartphone life.

Smartphone and Refugees

Thomas: It can be liberating to get a smartphone. Think about refugees. The explosive spread of the smartphone coincided almost exactly with the civil war and exodus from Syria. People who were forced to flee got one, sometimes immediately before leaving. On the whole, it was a blessing, enabling them to keep track, stay in touch, find their way and cherish memories, among many other usages. The situation for refugees nevertheless remains one characterized by uncertainty and waiting. It is said that refugees are people on the move, but most of the time, they sit and wait. Their time is less cumulative, less structured, and less directed than they would have wished for. Again, we can see how the smartphone sugars the pill by facilitating the filling of temporal gaps and enabling social communication, but it does not remove the more inert and sluggish structural conditions shaping the unstable temporal conditions under which undocumented migrants live. So the material world remains inert and resistant, no matter how digital you become.

Martina: Digitally mediated forms of service are increasingly normalized and are rapidly transforming work and daily life by creating new digital-social-spatial relationships. The platform economy, in particular, offers new ways of working and new means of consumption. For me, we must not forget that all this is part of surveillance capitalism and that imply the additional precarization of labor forms. How are these two aspects connected in your opinion? Are they parallel forms of overheating and cooling-down processes?

Thomas: Yes, absolutely. So before we move to corporate power and surveillance capitalism, which others have written well about – I'm thinking of people like Evgeny Morozov and Shoshana Zuboff (Morozov, 2013; Zuboff, 2019) – let's think about how amplification has affected work. The points you make are important. The Uber phenomenon would have been impossible without apps and smartphones. Getting an Uber cab is so frictionless and easy now that we have almost forgotten how frustrating it used to be to call a taxi. The flip side is that Uber

drivers have to make themselves available continuously since the company takes a substantial slice of their income, and they teeter on the edge of misery. In South Africa, most Uber drivers are from Zimbabwe. Why? Because they have difficulties finding proper jobs owing to ethnic discrimination. Not because it's a great job.

This also applies to other parts of the gig economy. Food delivery services are a good example, since they, too, rely entirely on apps and smartphones. Just as with Uber, having a meal delivered has become affordable – for the global upper and middle classes – and fast, efficient and frictionless. For the people carrying out the deliveries, or the restaurants cooking the food, the situation is different; their slice of the cake is thin and diminishing owing to the aggressive competition encouraged by the system. It is a spiral of ruthless runaway competition, bad for workers, bad for the environment, but good in the short term for the end-consumer.

And since you mention surveillance capitalism, let's linger a bit on that too. As they say, when a service is free, it is because you are the product. Increasing consumption in the general population has never been easier. The giants, from Tencent to Amazon, have a lot of knowledge about how to push the right buttons in order to make people buy more; but so do the smaller actors, who also accumulate a great deal of knowledge about what they call the market, but which used to be people. This kind of overheating, combining worker exploitation with aggressive marketing, naturally contributes to another, which we've spoken about earlier, namely environmental destruction and climate change. So a question that should be raised is about the connection between the smartphone revolution and the global environmental catastrophe.

Smartphone and Time

Thomas: But let's return to the question of the smartphone and time. People managed their lives perfectly well before they were colonized by the smartphone, but suddenly it has become indispensable. Someone I know was unlucky and cracked the screen on her iPhone the other day. I offered to take it to a repair workshop I knew, but she hesitated. She might then have to relinquish it for several hours, which would have been impractical. Life did have a different rhythm as late as the 1980s, before the internet and mobile phone revolution took off. Perhaps the forms of social interaction haven't changed that much, but it is quite clear that the smartphone lets us run multiple processes at the same time, so that you can fill all the gaps with virtual networking, even when you are with other people physically. We are all familiar with this syndrome, I believe. But there is not just a simple just-so story to be told. The smartphone compresses and destabilizes time and space, but it also has the potential to expand space and make time more flexible. The smartphone makes consumption, communication, and production more efficient. But at the same time, speed differs by country and context. Acceleration, fragmented time, and the addiction to speed clearly are conducive to stress. This is a problem in the affluent

classes in overheated countries, and that's where all the worried newspaper columnists and authors of worried books about brain pollution and concentration loss come from. But at the same time, in a vast number of places, especially in the Global South, there is too much slowness and too many gaps – the hottest countries are often the least overheated ones. The contribution of the smartphone to the economy and overall speed is potentially very significant in an African town where the formal sector of the economy is non-existent, people do not have bank accounts and the logistics of work used to be sluggish and leisurely. But even there, not everything accelerates: think about family organization, religious values, cooking practices, these important aspects of life may not have been affected. The fast rhythms required by the smartphone clash with the slow rhythms in the natural and physical world. Life is polyrhythmic, and the smartphone can only sync a few slices of it. Similarly, Habermas wrote already in the 1960s about the colonization of life-worlds by the market, but 60 years later, most of us are still capable of protecting important parts of our lives from the transactional logic. So we mustn't underestimate the agency of ordinary people like you, me, African market dealers and teenagers on TikTok.

Martina: So, let us return to a theme that has been present since the beginning of your works: time. The smartphone pushes toward a fragmentation of the time we live. We find ourselves living continuous temporal regimes superimposed on each other, isn't it?

Thomas: In the 2020s, the smartphone is a good place to begin because it concerns some of the ways in which temporality has been affected by the penetration of it into people's life-worlds. We have already spoken about the very substantial variations, but let us for now focus on generic, structural features of the smartphone, which apply in comparable, often similar ways everywhere. Before the mobile revolution, many relied on coin-operated phones. We always carried coins, while today, some societies are moving towards a cash-free economy, which mainly makes it cumbersome to release a shopping cart in supermarkets. In addition, for many years, only a minority of households had their own landline in a great number of societies. In a country like Britain, millions of people had to go to the pub to make their phone calls, long after they got their radio and telly. The rhythms of life were different then. When we went on holiday to Rome or Crete, we might buy a stack of postcards on the first day, write them during the next couple of days, buy stamps, and put them in the mail. In the early years of this century, there was always some excitement as to whether the cards would reach my mum and mother-in-law before we returned from vacation. The postcard was then phased out. It still exists, but it is unlikely that many of the cards that are purchased now are actually sent, they probably end up on fridges, in drawers or as gift cards. In its time, the postcard nevertheless represented acceleration and enhanced efficiency. Writing and sending it was faster than writing a letter, and one got a pretty and evocative photo on the back as a bonus. Other future-oriented technologies were rendered obsolescent more quickly and frequently because they were replaced by other inventions that performed the same tasks with increased speed and efficiency. The airship may have been the most spectacular of all. Zeppelins have been compared with dinosaurs, with the safer and more flexible aeroplanes playing the metaphoric part of mammals

that got lucky after the meteor strike 66 million years ago. But the comparison is imperfect and unfair to our saurian relatives. A long succession of dinosaur families and species dominated life on the planet for nearly two hundred million years, while the airship was a brief interlude, a poorer alternative to the aeroplane. Even today, one lineage of the dinosaurs live on in the shape of birds. The smartphone is – among many other things – an entertainment machine, a bottomless and endless source of encyclopedic knowledge, a news service, an atlas and a weather forecaster. This aspect of the smartphone, which concerns information, can make it appear as a younger, shrunk, and deterritorialized relative of the newspaper, the cinema, and the television set. It miniaturizes, simplifies, standardizes and accelerates. To refugees who find themselves in one of their liminal phases, the smartphone may to a greater extent be a descendant of the landline and the phone booth, the letter, the postcard, and the physical meeting at the railway station or one of the other sites where newly arrived male migrants typically congregate. It has turned sockets and free wifi into scarce and coveted resources, precisely because it is a multifaceted lifeline. What these two otherwise very different groups have in common is that the smartphone in both cases contributes to the destabilization of time and space. It is an overheating device *par excellence*, and this is why the two most significant objects for defining the present decade are the smartphone and the container ship.

Between Synchronization and Desynchronization

Martina: It seems to be impossible that there was a time when we did not all have a smartphone. How did we manage without it?

Thomas: You know, this rhetorical question has become commonplace, often accompanied by a self-ironic smile. It is a well-established fact that people managed their lives well before they were colonized by this new piece of mobile technology. But as I said, life had a different rhythm then. Appointments might be fixed days or weeks ahead. No microadjustment was possible, whereas it is now common, and has entered into everyday routines, to send a text from a bus or tram if one is a little late for an appointment. Before this possibility existed, there needed to be more flexibility, in other words gaps, elbow-room, empty time to be filled with anything you fancied. You were free from the constraints of micro-coordination when you were not in and unavailable, and you were allowed to fill the temporal gaps with anything or nothing. The temporal flexibility was, in other words, greater before the mobile Internet, while the spatial flexibility has increased.

The smartphone is what has been called a polymedium (Madianou & Miller, 2012), a powerful, pocket-sized multimedia computer. Precisely this versatility makes the smartphone a promising candidate for comparative research; the device is more or less identical everywhere, but it is put to use in locally distinct ways. In the space of just a few years around the turn of the century, social life was reorganized by the (pre-smart) mobile phone, and it happened in such a frictionless and comfortable way that most of us barely noticed it; until, that is, we discovered how

unpractical and unpleasant it was to leave it at home—or, conversely, what life it could be to spend a few hours offline, without the pressures created by the 24/7 connectivity.

Martina: So, the smartphone, we could say that is a synecdoche of hybrid time regimes created by it. or by the use we made of it.

Thomas: That's a great way of phrasing it. Time and space are compressed in this way. Where you happen to be does not interfere with your online activity, and this is highly significant for people who are on the move and rarely sleep two nights in a row in the same place, such as refugees, but also small-time criminals and others. A landline would have been useless to them. I mentioned research on refugees and the smartphone. To refugees, the smartphone may function as an archive and a personal museum. It is not just used to fill the present and plan the future, but also to sequence and memorize the past. Just consider what your electronic address book says about your life. Getting your hands on it would be a major scoop for your future biographer, but if you are an undocumented migrant, it is also highly interesting for the police in a country where the state has an expressed ambition to know as much as possible about those who find themselves within its boundaries. This ambition became even more urgent after the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic. The online person shrinks and compresses time, spreads it out (as when we wait for a day or two before responding to electronic messages), watches an entire season of a TV series at a single sitting rather than watching one episode every Thursday at 9 p.m., and micro-coordinates with friends and family to dodge the need of shoehorning appointments between existing appointments. So this gadget is a generous gift and lubricant to global capitalism, relying as it does on increasing speed and efficiency.

It is therefore worth reminding ourselves of the fact that the smartphone can also help you reducing the speed, as when you sit abandoned and cold in a refugee camp on a Greek island, killing time by watching music videos from your youth or reading and rereading messages from friends, NGOs, relatives, and others; you may play old games or read about the poet Rumi on the Farsi version of Wikipedia. The nature of the mobile-phone encourages the here and now at the expense of the there and then. It strengthens the tyranny of the moment, but it can also be used to draw long lines backwards, sideways, and forwards in time. Specifically, synchronization and acceleration are some of the most important effects of the smartphone, whether you are a refugee or safely settled rich or poor, old or young. It is not least an indispensable tool for anyone who is engaged in an economic activity which requires coordination with others, especially in countries where the formal sector of the economy is weakly developed. In the Lusaka market, Zambian women who buy and sell anything from vegetables to fabrics use WhatsApp to increase their productivity. Like one might expect, they may spend some of the quiet moments of the day chatting with friends and calling their mother, but they are also able to stay in contact with customers and suppliers in real time with the new gadget, which has spread rapidly in Zambia, like many other African countries, since around 2015. Let us imagine that you have a vegetable stall and have run out of asparagus beans before lunch. Just a few years ago, you would have to wait for the delivery boy to pass by on his rickety scooter some time in the next day. You can now text the wholesaler and promise a 20%

bonus if he can deliver the beans in 1 h. Turnover increases for both parties, and the farmer who supplies the entire saler has an incentive to weed and fertilize a bit more than usual. As I mentioned the affluent classes, complaints about excessive speed are common. Everything is too fast, is said; it becomes difficult to concentrate on one thing at the time; life is already too overheated, and there is a great demand for brakes such as meditation centres, courses in mindfulness, and apps which tell people to stand still and breathe slowly once an hour – apps that are meant to liberate us from apps!

We now rotate our touchscreen a couple of times and wait for about 5 min before the taxi appears. With a similar app, inactive taxi drivers in an African city could receive bookings instantly, and when there were none, they could have spent the unproductive time helping their uncle in the peanut field or selling soft drinks to tourists on the beach. The problem in such settings is not acceleration and stress, but rather that there is too much slowness and too many gaps. Now, calculating the contribution of the smartphone to the economy in different countries would have been an impossible task, not least because much of the increased productivity takes place in the informal sector, thus passing under the radar of those who measure GDP. Its economic contribution is nevertheless, beyond doubt, very considerable where it is implemented, owing to improved logistics and increased overall speed.

Between Personal and Social Time

Martina: Given that digital technologies both shape and are embedded in everyday life, I would like to take our conversation on the relationship between time and technology on a more individual level. Zerubavel as early as 1987 pointed out how private time was getting smaller and smaller; the quality of being always accessible nevertheless remains a powerful symbol of a rapidly dying traditional social order and is still strongly cherished and admired within traditional domains of social life such as family and friendship. The extent to which one approximates an ideal-typical state of ever-availability remains a most common criterion for evaluating how committed a parent, child, sibling, or friend is (Zerubavel, 1987, 343–350). Do you see in this a form of resistance to accelerated acceleration? Is it a form of protection from it, a kind of slowness in caring for the relationships most important to each of us?

Thomas: Important point. I mentioned Habermas and his warning against the colonization of life-worlds earlier, and we should not forget that in fact, important chunks of our life-worlds haven't been colonized. We continue to live in different temporalities – some long, some short, some fast, some slow. So there is no one-way street here, towards the overheated acceleration of everything, even in the individual lives of middle-class people struggling with their time budgets. This does not mean that there are no problems. Temporal regimes clash, and the fast tends to get the upper hand over the slow. There is an historical irony in the fact that we now live much longer than our ancestors, but think shorter. The antidote, or resistance, to the

dying social order Zerubavel refers to, could be twofold. Prioritize the slow and cumulative, such as planting an oak or being married; but also being present in the moment, in the here and now, without having your gaze fixed at a point 10 s in the future. For these resistance strategies to be viable, and I think they deserve to be since they give back some of the autonomy that has been taken away, a systemic critique at a higher level is necessary as well. In the final analysis, it is the growth economy that steals our slowness and what Zerubavel calls private time. Perhaps we should be clearer about this, since all good social science – and we could include social critique – goes beyond the mere symptoms to the causes.

Martina: Let us take a step back by going back to Durkheim, one of your favorite authors that we have in common between sociology and anthropology. Using his concept of ‘moral density’ of our relationships (Durkheim 1966, p. 198–202, 1984, pp. 201–205) – measured by the frequency at which we actually meet one another, talk over the telephone, or exchange whatsapp messages and e-mail-is also commonly regarded as indicative of the degree of social distance or intimacy that characterizes them. So, my favourite list of chat or my favourite gmail contacts tells me their relative significance in her life and the relative degree of my commitment to each of them on-line and off-line. In a overheated society, it is quite difficult managing different time regimes every day in which we are immersed, but, to me, the same important symbolic significance persists online and offline for these privileged and personal relationships. What do you think about it?

Thomas: Hmm ... if you are talking about the same relationships, to the same significant others, activated online and offline, I agree. Not returning someone’s call, or message, can be just as rude as not showing up at their party. But if we distinguish between the people we know both online and offline, and those we only know in one of the settings, we might reach a different conclusion, and this is where Durkheim’s excellent concept of *moral density* comes into its own. One might begin by classifying social relationships along an axis of personal involvement or – as some might prefer – investment in social capital. Pressing ‘like’ costs you less than two calories, but getting out of the house, taking a bus or tram somewhere, ringing a doorbell and so on, is more demanding. Picking up the phone to make a call is intermediate in terms of personal investment. But this is not merely about being physically present or not. You can get quite deeply involved with people whom you don’t meet physically, and indifferent about people you do meet. I guess this answers our question about chipping off moral capital when not fulfilling your side of the moral contract. The difference that makes a difference is not digital versus analog, but degrees of involvement. Perhaps Giddens was only partly right when he said, around 1990, that *presence-availability* was becoming a scarce resource (Giddens, 1991), simply being present in the same place. Yes, as not least the pandemic taught us, there are many registers of communication that are only activated when we are in the same place together. But we shouldn’t be too rigid. There will also be contexts where purely digital relationships are also immensely meaningful and give substance and depth to people’s social lives. I am thinking, for example, about physically disabled people whose mobility is limited. They can have quite rich and fulfilling social lives online, often in gaming communities.

Martina: I would like to come back to the origin of the overheating approach using our academic experience. As we discussed in the conversation of the fast and slow academic, we often experience the conflict between different time regimes. If I am not mistaken, somewhere you wrote, we fight between two temporal regimes: the pressure to produce more this year than last year, and the expectation that we should do a good and thorough job. Life is a mess, and – always quoting you - life is polyrhythmic, and the smartphone can only synchronize small bits of it while reminding us of our desynchronization because it regularly shows, with minute precision, that we are actually out of synchronization. So, my question is: have you ever thought of a semiotic perspective on time regimes in your overheating approach? I remember that in *The Tyranny of the Moment*, at one point, you distinguish the characteristics of slow time and fast time ... I was thinking something similar about time regimes.

Thomas: Absolutely, slow and fast times have distinct phenomenological characteristics; but I must admit that I have not thought about this distinction in semiotic terms although I use semiotic tools in other contexts. Let me think. Quite clearly, the time regimes we speak of digitalization can often be seen as slow versus fast, but sometimes an elaboration is necessary, such as fragmented versus continuous time; the Greek distinction *chronos* vs. *kairos*, the flow of time versus the opportune moment for action, also tells us something interesting about temporalities. We all live in nested, sometimes contradictory temporalities, right? — and so the fast, fragmented, urgent time cannibalizes the slow, continuous, organic time. This is happening all over the place. Fast-growing pigs and wheat are preferred to those that have a more leisurely pace. In an accelerated temporal regime, the exchange of signs is frantic and continuous. That is a familiar problem in an overheated, over-saturated information society. Conversely, a slower time regime permits fewer signs to be exchanged – semiosis is slowed down – but as a compensation, it allows for more depth; each act of signification becomes more meaningful. Yes, we could work out a semiotic analysis along these lines, and connect it to other aspects of speed and slowness as well. The slow growth of the forest oak versus the fast growth of the plantation tree. The speed of the airplane versus the slowness of the sailing ship. Let us think more about this.

Towards Hybrid Time Regimes?

Martina: If we tried to make a pattern, we would see ideal types hybridizing with each other. I always come back to the *Tyranny of the Moment* because for me it is the seedbed of the overheating approach. When you wrote about new tensions that supplement the old ones (2001, 29), we could reread them through what you just said. So, the process out of control can be depicted as a set of dichotomies interrelated with each other. From left to right, you can find acceleration ideal type and the counter-reactions.

Acceleration world	Cooling-down reactions
1. Fast time	1. Slow time
2. Freedom	2. Security
3. Unpredictability	3. Predictability
4. Individual	4. Community
5. Impulses to act	5. Roots
6. Ambivalence	6. Fundamentalism
7. Immediacy (present of present)	7. Future of future
8. Continuous change	8. Cumulative and linear growth
9. Youth	9. Maturity

Among all these elements, I would like to stay with you always on time, that is, number 7. It seems to me that the only possible alternative to respond to this unstable acceleration is to go back to the sense of time. It is impossible to stop a car at high speed if you are without the handbrake. But if we began to experience the present as a small piece of the imminent future, we could produce what someone called “small incremental changes”. What do you think?

Thomas: Thank you for this, Martina, you always help me clarify my sometimes muddled thinking, this is great. I would first like to comment on your ninth cell. The tendency in our time to glorify youth and bracket aging is a symptom of fast change and advanced systemic amnesia: It is as if everything is here and now, nothing there and then. It makes us stupid to argue that young people should have more political power. We old men and women should instead strive to become good ancestors for them, role models and teachers. I’m not saying that we should stop listening to the young, but if there is a common belief that truth always comes in the shape of a young person, the implication is that neither experience, knowledge nor reasoned reflection are of any value. All that matters in this kind of breathless presentist society is openness to change.

In most historical societies, adults and old people were respected by their juniors owing to their superior knowledge and experience. In complex modern societies, old people do not have a particularly high authority by virtue of age: they are no longer achievers and are therefore less valuable. Exceptions still exist. In contemporary Japan, old people still enjoy high rank owing to their superior wisdom and experience. You know, when Tesla were working on an accident algorithm for its self-driving cars, it became apparent that they had to apply different criteria to the USA and Japan. If the car had to ‘choose’ between crashing into a child or an old person, it would save the child in America, but the retiree in Japan. Japanese society, in its way super efficient and fast-paced, has found a balance between the slow and the fast, the moment and the *longue durée*, which differs from that in youth-worshipping societies.

But let me return to the relationship between the present and a future that stretches way beyond your lifetime and mine. Presentism is a recipe for hedonism and stupidity, and the lack of a historical awareness is not just a problem for an understanding of the past, but also for thinking constructively about the future. As

Orwell reminded us in *1984*, those who control the past control the future. Presently, historical awareness is quite weak. We do not seem to have a credible story about the transition from industrial society to information society, while there were some standard narratives – debatable, but useful in their way – about the earlier great transformations in human history. As a result of this amnesia, it is hard to think constructively about a future. The new and not-so-new social movements, from Occupy to Fridays for Future, do not offer a recipe; they propose no solutions, utopias or ideal models for society. Their critique of the current world order, that it is unjust and destructive, is well taken. But then what? As late as the 1980s, serious blueprints for a more sustainable, fairer and more equitable society were developed. They were swallowed up, eaten alive, by the presentism of the overheated information society.

Small incremental changes are good, but are they sufficient? As you can guess, my answer is no. To my surprise, the General Secretary of the United Nations, Antonio Guterrez, has given a series of speeches in the early 2020s where he proposes something more radical. In essence, he is saying that if we are going to succeed in saving the planet, we need to build societies which are fundamentally different from the ones that dominate today. His views are really very radical. Reading Guterrez from my vantage-point, I see him as urging us to change our value sets, our economic systems and the dominant views about the good life; slowing down and cooling down, scaling down and ensuring that our descendants will be able to revere us as good ancestors.

But as you suggest, Martina, charity begins at home. Eating more sustainably, taking your bike or tram instead of the car, restricting your air travel to a minimum – yes, such changes in consumer habits represent a value system which is compatible with a more humane and responsible world society. But how about making some incremental changes in settings which are not defined by consumerism? Work, everyday life, socialising? There are many possibilities. De facto, we have more freedom than the state and market want us to believe. A less overheated world, and less overheated lives, have to be created from above, from below and sideways. And one enduring lesson from the pandemic, which is not particularly popular among the ruling classes, is the realization that the things that matters the most in life, that which makes life meaningful in a deeply fulfilling and enduring sense, those things are free and climate-neutral. That could be something to build on.

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Chapter 8

Public Engagement



Adventure has no place in the anthropologist's profession; it is merely one of those unavoidable drawbacks, which detract from his effective work through the incidental loss of weeks or months; there are hours of inaction when the informant is not available; periods of hunger, exhaustion, sickness perhaps; and always the thousand and one dreary tasks which eat away the days to no purpose and reduce dangerous living in the heart of the virgin forest to an imitation of military service...

—Claude Lévi-Strauss (1976 [1955]: 1)

Anthropology is frequently described as the art of “making the familiar exotic and the exotic familiar”. It has also been described as “the most humanistic of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities”. The standard definition describes it as the comparative study of humans, their societies and their cultural worlds, simultaneously exploring human diversity and what it is that all human beings have in common.

Why should we care about this, in an interconnected, globalized world where virtually anyone can access other people's worlds through media old and new, and why should it matter? For one thing, we may be both less and more similar than we tend to think, notwithstanding globalization. For another, the kind of knowledge anthropologists have is more important than ever, precisely because globalization brings us closer together.

Making knowledge accessible and interesting to a wider public than the academic one is an underrated activity. We argue that the social sciences, notably sociology and anthropology, ought to matter not just as an academic pursuit of knowledge but also as a tool to engage with the world in a practical, if not political, way. Public anthropology amounts to an attempt to bridge the gap and overcome the alienation between the closed professional group and the global society in which we all take part. The ideal readership could be academics working in other fields, or they could be anybody. They could be your aunt in Galway and your niece in Gdansk. Making your knowledge interesting to them is perfectly possible, but it is not as easy as it may seem.

The anthropologist's Audience

Martina: Today I'd like to start with a question that I hope will involve you very much. Who do you write for? When you're writing your ethnographic notes, when you revise a research design ... looking at your writings so far we can't not consider your writings on an engaged anthropology. . . Just to remind the reader, your website opens with this phrase "Engaging with the world" (see <https://www.hyllanderiksen.net/>). not properly a coincidence, isn't? So let's start with the audience you have in mind.

Thomas: No, it is not a coincidence, and I have always enjoyed communicating with a broad range of people, from colleagues and students in academia to pensioners' social clubs, different kinds of professionals and workers outside the academic system, not to forget curious teenagers who like to read. Luckily, my employer is not likely to fire me, so I can do pretty much as I want. Also, I have always enjoyed interdisciplinary collaborations and conversations, so speaking with people outside of the anthropological goldfish bowl is not a new experience. But having said this – well, my first love in this domain was anthropology, that is where I received my professional training and where my professional life somehow merges with my personal life. To me, anthropology is primarily a way of thinking, a particular way of looking at the world that can be applied to any aspect of human life and a tool to understand yourself. As such, it is complementary to and a useful supplement to other human sciences such as psychology and economics. Anthropology distinguishes itself by trying to account for human diversity, which we study through long-term fieldwork and analyse using comparative methods. So we try to get really close to some of our interlocutors and build theory through dialogue with people out there, not just through discussing with other academics. Thanks to this methodology, we are capable of producing unique insights into the informal dimension of social and cultural life, that is to say what is actually going on, and we may well emphasize the difference between what people say and what they do, and between the formal structure of society and what actually happens. Perhaps we cannot say much about interest rates or acidification of the oceans, but we know people and their life-worlds pretty well. In this, there is a thin dividing line between social anthropology and qualitative sociology.

But it is us anthropologists who have truly embraced the Roman dramatist Terence's slogan *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* – that is, 'I am a human; nothing human is foreign to me.' Making the exotic familiar and the familiar exotic has been part of the research process in this corner of the academic world.

Role of the Anthropologist

Martina: How would you describe the role of anthropology in society?

Thomas: Compared to other social sciences, anthropology lacks a clear societal mission. Representatives of the different academic disciplines sometimes speak of their ‘societal assignment’ in order to justify themselves and their continued public funding. In my native Norway, as far as the social sciences are concerned, the economists run the country through powerful institutions such as the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank; the political scientists look after the nuts and bolts of government at all levels, from foreign policy to municipal councils; and the sociologists defend the welfare state and gender equality, while worrying about the integration of immigrants whenever they have a spare moment. So what, then, about the social anthropologists? To begin with, there are many of us in Norway, which possibly has the largest proportion of anthropologists in the world. Since we have no clearly defined professional niches, we work in many settings both public and private, from development NGOs and local government to communication agencies, libraries and the media, apart from having a pretty broad academic presence well beyond the universities, in research institutes of different kinds. A previous President of the Sámi Parliament was actually trained as an anthropologist, as was a former Minister of Development.

In the public eye, anthropologists are often seen as irresponsible cultural relativists who defend horrible customs just because they belong to ‘a culture’, but on a good day, we may also be described as ‘fascinating’. And since we don’t have any given obligations, problems that we are expected to solve, perhaps our main task in the public sphere to make unexpected comparisons, to ask unusual questions and to interrogate the received wisdom. It is not our job to worry. We are allowed to be playful and cheeky. Norwegian anthropologists have often played the part of the trickster, like Anansi the spider in West African and Caribbean lore. You know, Anansi is a small and weak animal, but he is smarter and more inventive than the sluggish rhino or the vain lion, so he always gets the upper hand in the end.

Martina: In your *Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence* (2006), at a certain point, you challenge your colleagues to let go of starchy writing styles and painstakingly slow production. You appear so concerned with anthropologists regaining stature as a significant voice in contemporary issues that clearly fall under their purview: multiculturalism, identity politics and value of human diversity. How are things now?

Thomas: I’d say that the situation is somewhat better now than it was a couple of decades ago. Anthropologists – like other academics – have become more skilled at using a diversity of media for getting their message across. There are lively blogs written by anthropologists, quite a few have their own podcasts, many have personal websites, lots of us are active in the social media, and some even have their own YouTube channels. In other words, technological changes which have happened since I wrote that book have encouraged and facilitated a broader engagement with a wider public. Now, this naturally leads to a different problem, which is simply that of finding and keeping an audience. The democratization of the means of communication encourages the soundbite, the simplified message, the one-liner and the polemic, not the kind of nuance and complexity that you and I do our best to represent.

There is no simple solution to this problem, but in most cases, some nuance, detail and complexity has to be sacrificed when you communicate with a non-academic audience. Exceptions exist, such as Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, which presented original research and yet became a global bestseller. That was an impressive achievement. It seems as if David Graeber and David Wengrow's *The Dawn of Everything* (2021) which is also a complex, meandering book, may achieve something comparable.

Martina: Scholars have long struggled to find a balance between academia and the public sphere, looking to abandon the ivory tower without sacrificing content and complexity. Much of your argumentation could be applied to any academic discipline. You remind me of something Michael Buroway wrote, namely that sociology was born with the aspiration to be that angel of history, impugned in the search for order among the ruins of modernity and capable of saving the hopes of progress. Karl Marx protected socialism from alienation; Émile Durkheim defended organic solidarity from anomie and egoism; despite the premonition of an "icy night", Max Weber discovered freedom at the heart of rationalization and meaning in disenchantment. If our predecessors sought to change the world, we have too often ended up helping to preserve it as it is. The original passion for social justice, equality economic, human rights, environmental protection, political freedom or, more simply, a better world that brought many of us to sociology is being directed toward obtaining academic credentials. Do you find some similarities between sociology and anthropology?

Thomas: Absolutely, and Buroway is exemplary. He has a double training in anthropology and sociology, and has been very inspiring by combining genuine social engagement with stringent methodology and original theory. He is also great when it comes to involving younger scholars in his projects, co-authoring work with them and so on. And in many ways, in Europe, sociology and anthropology are siblings, born from the same classics, but moving apart when they came of age. Durkheim and Mauss did not make the disciplinary distinction, but their students and followers did; some studying complex industrial societies, while the other group went out to villages in remote countries. We followed different itineraries, and today, although many anthropologists do their research in complex societies, we still largely use the toolbox inherited from Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. In America, the situation was different since modern American anthropology, largely created by Franz Boas and his students, grew out of the German humanities tradition.

Martina: In your studies you often quote Mead and Geertz but, they really seem to be two such different scholars, primarily they are different in how they have been perceived by the academic community.

Thomas: Mead was the best known, but far from the only anthropologist of her generation who easily, and with visible pleasure, translated research materials into engaging prose. Her contemporary Ralph Linton, a master of popularization, wrote volumes of fascinating anthropology and sociology without ever lapsing into technical language. His most famous piece was probably 'One Hundred Per Cent American', first published in *The American Mercury* before its inclusion in the author's introductory text 'The Study of Man' in the following year. This article

was originally written as a subversive comment on tendencies to isolationism and nationalist self-righteousness in the US of the 1930s. Linton sets the tone of his ethnographic vignette by an arresting opening sentence: 'Our solid American citizen awakens in a bed built on a pattern which originated in the Near East but which was modified in Northern Europe before it was transmitted to America.' Following his 'typical American' through the minutiae of morning routines, buying a newspaper with coins (a Lydian invention), eating his breakfast with a fork (a medieval Italian invention) and a knife made of steel (an Indian alloy), he eventually thanks 'a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is 100 per cent American'. Unlike Mead, who had to describe others' lives vividly and intimately to create a basis for empathy and identification, Linton could safely rely on instant recognition among his readers. While Mead strives to make the exotic appear familiar, Linton makes the familiar exotic. Clifford Geertz, the most widely cited anthropologist in the last decades of the twentieth century, had a different appeal; there were no bells and whistles and no pandering to a lay audience in his work. Geertz was not only an eloquent writer, but an erudite man whose frame of reference extended well beyond anthropology. He was almost universally respected inside the discipline. His essays, rich in connotations and references to other intellectuals and artists, must be explained and unpacked to undergraduates for unusual reasons: if they fail to make sense of what he writes, the explanation may be that they have never heard of Croce or are uncertain as to exactly what kind of character Falstaff is, not that they are unfamiliar with the Nayar kinship system or Max Weber's view of Calvinism as the spiritual engine of capitalism. But at the end of the day, Geertz was too coy to come clean as a public intellectual. Although it would hardly cost him two calories to write an interesting essay on female circumcision in the *Atlantic*, or an op-ed piece on Islam in Indonesia for the *New York Times*, he did not do this kind of thing. One can only guess at his reasons; it is nevertheless beyond dispute that he shared this inclination to remain in the academic circles of discourse with the majority of his colleagues, which is a shame.

Martina: Why is a shame? I have no doubt that you have in mind an open and shareable science. . . You remind me of Ivan Illich (2008) criticizing the so-called "experts of 'too much'".

Thomas: Well, I have often had the feeling that other people stole our clothes while we were out swimming. We could have played a central role in the public debates about migration and what passes for identity politics these days, about human nature and human rights versus obligations, and a number of other issues, but we have left them to others, such as cultural studies scholars or evolutionary psychologists. Which is a pity, from my point of view.

Strategies of Communication

Martina: There are many possible styles of engagement; there is not just one way of engaging a readership which is neither paid (colleagues) nor forced (students) to read whatever it is that one writes. What is your style?

Thomas: There are a variety of strategies of communication with the outside world, which show the potential efficacy of a public anthropology not only in form, but also in substance. Let me reiterate some of the methods mentioned in *Engaging Anthropology*. First, there is the *Verfremdung* or *defamiliarization*. This technique was used, famously and to great effect, by the radical playwright Bertold Brecht, and a variant is often utilized in science fiction stories, for example in Alfred Kroeber's daughter Ursula Le Guin's fantasy novels. To mention another example, several of J. G. Ballard's novels and short stories are set in an England of a near future, where a tendency already noticeable in the present is identified by the author and slightly magnified – holidays in Spain, a fascination with speed and violence, communication via technological means such as videophones – with devastating and shocking results. In anthropology, defamiliarization has been praised as a technique of cultural critique by George Marcus and Michael Fischer back in the 1980s, and it is sometimes utilized by anthropologists who study their own society. As a younger colleague told me, upon his return from fieldwork in a semi-rural locality not very far from his native Oslo: 'Well, obviously one of the first things I asked them was, "Who do you marry?" My training had told me that it is always important to sort this kind of thing out, and even if they didn't respond immediately, I found out soon enough that they marry within a radius of one hour's travel.' When, in the 1980s, the Indian anthropologist G. Prakash Reddy was invited to study a Danish village, his primary motivation may not have been to defamiliarize the Danes, but that is how his work was perceived. Regardless of the flaws and misunderstandings marring his work, Reddy made a number of observations which could have enabled Danes to see themselves from a new angle. Although his analysis, which was eventually published in English (Reddy, 1993), was controversial and hotly debated, it may have had the indirect effect of generating some reflexivity concerning the ways Western anthropologists unwittingly defamiliarize the people they study, for example village Indians.

Reddy made some interesting observations. On his first day of fieldwork in the Danish village, he asked his interpreter if it was possible that they could ring someone's doorbell and ask for a glass of water. He thought this might not just be a way to quench his thirst, but also to get his first informant. Fieldwork began in the middle of a weekday, and the village was completely deserted, much to his dismay. The interpreter, who was also an anthropologist, explained that they couldn't do that; one simply doesn't knock on strangers' doors and ask for water. Later, Reddy would write about the Danes' odd relationship to their dogs, which they treated better, it seemed, than their old parents who might be tucked away in an old people's home; about to him he weakness and isolation of the small Danish family and other issues that he saw in relation to his implicit horizon of comparison, the Indian village. As it

turned out, however, most Danes did not enthusiastically allow themselves to be defamiliarized. Reddy's book was given a lukewarm reception among anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike, who felt – largely justifiably, it must be conceded – that he had misrepresented the Danes. Some were scandalized. Although it was published in both English and Danish, and reviewed in the *American Anthropologist* by Jonathan Schwartz, an American-born anthropologist living in Denmark, *'Danes are like that'* is scarcely known outside the country. Another foreign anthropologist who did research in Denmark years later, concluded that Reddy got a lot of things *nearly right*. Anyway, the really sad thing is that ethnographies of this kind, where anthropologists from the South study communities in the North, remain so rare after all these years. In general, the technique of defamiliarization – rendering the familiar exotic – seems to have been more common in mid twentieth-century anthropology than at present. I have already mentioned Ralph Linton's 'One hundred per cent American' another classic, which defends its place in the anthropology courses where it is still taught, is Horace Miner's amusing article 'Body ritual among the Nacirema' (1956). The Nacirema, of course, are 'a North American group living in the territory between the Canadian Cree, the Yaqui and Tarahumare of Mexico, and the Carib and Arawak of the Antilles.' Their body rituals involve the use of sacred fonts and potions kept in a chest built into the wall. The rituals are secret and never discussed even privately, except when children are initiated into their mysteries. The medicine men of the Nacirema have imposing temples, *latipso*, and '[t]he latipso ceremonies are so harsh that it is phenomenal that a fair proportion of the really sick natives who enter the temple ever recover.'

What Miner did, apart from parodying exoticizing ethnographic jargon, was to sensitize students to the implicit norms, rules and taboos prevalent in their own society. One of the messages from anthropology is that nothing is quite what it seems. As Daniel Miller and others have shown, fundamental aspects of human life can be illuminated through studies of modern consumption informed by anthropological perspectives. In his boos *A Theory of Shopping*, Miller (1998) argues that, quite opposite to what many people think, shopping is not mainly a selfish, narcissistic kind of activity. Rather, women shop out of consideration for others, whether they buy things for themselves or for relatives and friends. Miller compares shopping to sacrifice, and his analysis is also indebted to Mauss's famous theory of reciprocity, or mutual obligations, as the most fundamental glue of human communities. None of Miller's texts on shopping are popular in a strict sense, but they fulfil their mission as general statements on modernity by being read outside of anthropology narrowly defined – in business schools, cultural studies and interdisciplinary study programmes on modern society. They also create a *Verfremdung* effect by positing that in fact, many of our everyday practices can signify the opposite of what we may be inclined to believe before we have bothered to find out.

Unlike Linton's vignette, Miner's article on the Nacirema is politically harmless and could scarcely be accused of being 'anti-American' when it was published in the 1950s, even if it makes fun of the American craze for cleanliness. In recent years, there has actually been a substantial demand for similar self-exotizing exercises in

Scandinavia, where tourist boards, the civil service and even private enterprises solicit the services of anthropologists who are charged with the task of telling them ‘what they are really like’. Far more often, they ask consultants, who are usually more expensive, less knowledgeable and more ‘professional’ than anthropologists, to do the same thing. A more critical, and much more demanding task, would consist in showing the peculiarities of majority culture in the context of immigration. In most if not all North Atlantic countries, it is virtually taken for granted in the public sphere that immigrants are heavily burdened with culture, while the majority are just ordinary people.

One of Mead’s great contributions to the public discourse of her time consisted in pointing out not only that the middle-class ways of life typical of Middle America were culturally constructed and historically caused, but also that things her readers took for granted could be changed; that gender relations, values underpinning socialization and all sorts of cultural conventions were in fact different in other societies and therefore scarcely natural. This approach was hailed by Marcus and Fischer (1986) as exemplary, although they – like almost everybody else – had their doubts about the quality of Mead’s data. They ask for more nuance and context, for proper ethnography on adolescence in the USA rather than unreliable non-ethnographic accounts, and a more complex view of the nature of both American and Samoan culture. It may well be the case, however, that a public intervention of this kind has to make its point clearly and concisely at the outset, adding nuance under way. In fact, there is quite a bit of nuance in Mead’s account from Samoa, although much of it is buried in endnotes.

Then there is the narrative structure behind the ‘whodunit’ or detective story. The riddle form is a time-honoured and well-rehearsed form of storytelling, which makes it no less effective today if placed in the right hands. The author typically begins with a naïve, but difficult question – why did the Europeans conquer the world? Why is the Indian cow sacred? Why do people everywhere believe in gods? Why does the mother’s brother have a special place even in many patrilineal societies? – and then spends the next pages – 10 or 500, as the case might be – to answer it. He, or increasingly she, first brushes away resistance by presenting a few alternative explanations to be discarded as ludicrous or misguided, before embarking on the quest for credible answers.

A further strategy for storytelling is the personal journey. The English anthropologist Edmund Leach once remarked that all anthropologists were failed novelists. Every self-respecting anthropologist would oppose this view and point out, perfectly reasonably I guess, that anthropology raises the issues at hand in a much more accurate way than any travel writer would be able to, that it is more systematic and conscientious in its presentation of events and statements and so on. On the other hand, if you consider the professional skepticism of many contemporary anthropologists, who avoid using the word ‘science’, relinquish explicit comparison and are disdainful of anything that smacks of human universals, a good travelogue might well pass for an ethnography today. In principle, that is; this does not seem to happen very often in practice. The scarcity of readable, personal, anthropological travelogues is actually puzzling; the best example that comes to mind is

Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* (1976 [1955]). It seems that just as anthropologists excel in the study of other people's rituals but are inept at organizing and immersing themselves in their own rituals, and just as anthropologists have waxed lyrical about 'narratives' for two decades without offering many juicy narratives themselves, all the elements of the personal travelogue are present in the contemporary credo of post-positivist anthropology, yet we rarely bring them to fruition. Contemporary social and cultural anthropology is anti-scientistic and concerned with positioning and reflexivity. Phenomenological micro-description and hermeneutic empathy are contemporary virtues. And yet, there remain few bona fide anthropological monographs that have the characteristics of the personal journey. We could do better. I find that in my own work, I have increasingly tried to tell stories, perhaps inspired by good historians. It has been said that a good anthropological monograph contains an elephant of ethnography and a rabbit of theory but cooked in such a way that the taste of the rabbit is felt in every mouthful. This could be an ideal to emulate.

Martina: There are several reasons why anthropological knowledge can help in making sense of the contemporary world.

Thomas: Yes, that is my conviction, as you know. So much has happened, and continues to happen, and we need skilled interpreters. Notably, contact between culturally different groups has increased hugely only in my lifetime. Long-distance travelling has become common, safe and relatively inexpensive. In the nineteenth century, only a small proportion of the Western populations travelled to other countries (emigrants excluded), and as late as the 1950s, even fairly affluent Westerners rarely went on holiday abroad. Now, this has changed in recent decades. The flow of people who move temporarily between countries has grown exponentially and have led to intensified contact: Businesspeople, aid workers, students and tourists travel from rich countries to the poor ones, and labour migrants, refugees and students move in the opposite direction. Many more Westerners visit 'exotic' places today than a generation or two ago. I mean, when my parents were young in the 1950s, they might be able to go on a trip to Italy or London once. When I was young in the 1980s, we went by Interrail to Portugal and Greece, or on similar trips, every summer. Young people with similar backgrounds today might go on holiday to the Far East, Latin America or India. The scope of tourism has also been widened and now includes tailor-made trips and a broad range of special interest forms including 'adventure tourism', 'indigenous tourism' and 'cultural tourism', where you can go on guided tours to South African townships, Brazilian favelas or Indonesian kampungs. The very fact that 'cultural tourism' has become an important source of income for many communities in the Third World is a clear indication of an increased interest in other cultures from the West. At the same time as 'we' visit 'them' in growing numbers and under new circumstances, the opposite movement also takes place, though not for the same reasons. It is, obviously, because of the great differences in standards of living and life opportunities between rich and poor countries that millions of people from non-Western countries have settled in Europe and North America. A generation ago, it might have been necessary for an inhabitant in a Western city to travel to the Indian subcontinent in order to savour the fragrances and sounds of subcontinental cuisine and music. In fact, as late as 1980, there were

no Indian restaurants in my hometown. In 2022, there are dozens, ranging from first class establishments to inexpensive takeaway curryhouses. Pieces and fragments of the world's cultural variation can now be found virtually anywhere in the North Atlantic world. As a result, curiosity about others has been stimulated, and it has also become necessary for political reasons to understand what cultural variation entails. I'm thinking, obviously, about the ongoing controversies over multicultural issues, such as religious minority rights, the hijab, language instruction in schools or calls for affirmative action because of alleged ethnic discrimination in the labour market – all this testifies to an urgent need to deal sensibly with cultural differences.

To this, we could add that the world is shrinking in other ways too. Streaming services, social media and other internet platforms have created conditions for truly global, instantaneous and friction-free communications, for better and for worse in the opinion of many. Distance is no longer a hindrance for close contact. New, deterritorialized social networks or even 'virtual communities' develop, and at the same time, individuals have a larger palette of information to choose from. At the same time, the economy is also becoming increasingly globally integrated. Transnational companies have grown rapidly in numbers, size and economic importance over the last decades. The capitalist mode of production and monetary economies in general, which was globally dominant throughout the last century, have become nearly universal. In politics as well, global issues increasingly dominate the agenda. Issues of war and peace, the environment and poverty are all of such a scope, and involve so many transnational linkages, that they cannot be handled satisfactorily by single states alone. Pandemics and international terrorism are also transnational problems which can only be addressed by taking a global perspective. This ever tighter interweaving of formerly relatively separate sociocultural environments can lead to a growing recognition of the fact that we are all in the same boat: that humanity, divided as it is by class, culture, geography and opportunities, is fundamentally one. Also, culture changes rapidly in our era, and this is noticed nearly everywhere. In the West, the typical ways of life are certainly being transformed. The stable nuclear family is no longer the only common and socially acceptable way of life. Youth culture and trends in fashion and music change so fast that older people have difficulties following their twists and turns; food habits are being transformed, leading to greater diversity within many countries, secularism is rapidly changing the role of religion in society, and media consumption is thoroughly transnational. These and other changes make it necessary to ask questions such as: 'Who are we really?', 'What is our culture – and is it at all meaningful to speak of a 'we' that 'have' a 'culture'?', 'What do we have in common with the people who used to live here 50 or 100 years ago, and what do we have in common with people who live in an entirely different place today?', and 'Is it still defensible to speak as if we primarily belong to nations, or are other forms of group belonging more important?' Fourthly, recent decades have seen the rise of an unprecedented interest in cultural identity, which is increasingly seen as an asset. Many feel that their local uniqueness is being threatened by globalization, indirect colonialism and other forms of influence from the outside, and react by attempting to strengthen or at least preserve what they see as their unique culture. In many cases, minority organizations demand cultural rights on

behalf of their constituency; in other cases, the state tries to slow down or prevent processes of change or outside influence through legislation. Our era is truly an era of overheated globalization. In order to understand this seemingly chaotic historical period, we need the right tools, and anthropology can provide some of them.

Social and cultural anthropology is not so much a precise science as a way of approaching the world and the human condition. It offers substantial knowledge about local ways of life, worldviews and cultural diversity, but more importantly, it raises questions in its peculiar way. Instead of asking, 'What is a human being?', it asks, 'What is it like to be a human being in this particular society?' Such questions may profitably be asked within other disciplines as well, in the spirit of intellectual pluralism and cross-fertilization. Social and cultural anthropology has the whole of human society as its area of interest and tries to understand the ways in which human lives are unique, but also the sense in which we are all similar. When, for example, we study the traditional economic system of the Tiv of Central Nigeria, an essential part of the exploration consists in understanding how their economy is connected with other aspects of their society. If this dimension is absent, Tiv economy becomes incomprehensible to anthropologists. If we do not know that the Tiv traditionally could not buy and sell land, and that they have customarily not used money as a means of payment, it will be plainly impossible to understand how they themselves interpret their situation and how they responded to the economic changes imposed on their society during colonialism in the last century. Anthropology tries to account for the social and cultural variation in the world, but a crucial part of the anthropological project also consists in conceptualizing and understanding similarities between social systems and human relationships. As Lévi-Strauss once wrote, "Anthropology has humanity as its object of research, but unlike the other human sciences, it tries to grasp its object through its most diverse manifestations" (1983, 49). Differently phrased: anthropology is about how different people can be, but it also tries to find out in what sense it can be said that all humans have something in common.

Martina: The tension between the universal and the particular has been immensely productive in anthropology, and it remains an important one.

Thomas: In a sense, connecting the large scale to the small is a common theme in much intellectual work, including some of the great novels. Think about Charles Dickens's novels about the gritty, unequal early industrial society where he lived. At his best – and he was often at his best – he wrote the life stories of individuals while simultaneously providing a pretty convincing picture of exploitation as a systemic feature of capitalism. Or take his great contemporary and namesake, Charles Darwin. In order to build his grand theory of evolution, he needed hundreds or even thousands of specimens. He had his famous finches from the Galápagos islands, of course, but also fossils from Chile, bones from Argentina, butterflies from Brazil and bred pigeons from the East End of London.

You can work deductively or inductively. My first instinct as a writer and anthropologist is to work inductively, to start with the story and build up the theory from below. But it is impossible to build a theory entirely inductively. As the philosopher Gadamer said, there can be no judgement without a pre-judgement or

‘prejudice’ – he uses the term *Vorurteil* (Gadamer, 1992 [1960]) By this he means that in order to observe anything at all, you need to have some idea as to what you’re looking for, in other words some general notion or hypothesis. In my own case, when I do my overheating research on globalization and local life-worlds, this duality is essential: I typically start with some general assumption about social life, or more empirically, large-scale global statistics on – say – the growth in containership trade or the spread of smartphones – and have these notions of a general nature at the back of my mind when trying to understand what is taking place on the ground. We ask questions about what it is like to be a person in a particular – overheated – setting, but the full context of the question includes both some general assumptions about personhood and some knowledge about the large-scale systems of which this person forms part. Only a naïve empiricist would assume that you can go out into the world and simply observe what it is like. Our gaze always has a direction; we are not merely looking but looking at and for something. All knowledge amounts to a simplification. The territory is always more complex than the map. The challenge consists in deciding on the right kind of simplification. And, as Einstein said, make it as simple as possible. He then adds: But not simpler.

Beyond Felix Bartholdy’s Posture: Some Concluding Perspectives

The most obvious objection to what we have been saying in our conversations so far could go like this: “You sound just like Felix Bartholdy” (Eriksen, 2001, 18)¹. Faced with an ocean of acceleration, Felix tries to drink it up instead of learning to swim. All of our conversations open windows of criticism onto an overheated world, so we should now attempt to shape our thoughts and, to avoid drinking pointlessly like Bartholdy, produce some positive suggestions.²

1. *Slowness is the other side of acceleration, and needs protecting.* Changes are taking place faster and faster, and there are no brakes available to slow things down. The ‘mantra’ of the overheating approach - the main protagonist of our conversations - remains this ‘accelerated acceleration’ (a.a.), which envelops and overwhelms us. The introduction to Chap. 3 makes it quite clear just how massive

¹In the novel *The Oversleeper’s Sad Breakfast*, the protagonist - Felix Bartholdy - analyzes the contents of his bookstore purchases and all the volumes in his home that he has never read. Caught up in a morbid quest for exhaustiveness and completeness, he lets his doubts ramify in a stream of consciousness that constitutes the novel itself. He comes to the conclusion that he would never read even a small portion of the books he owned (Eriksen, 2001, p.17 et seq). “Facing the enormity of an ocean of information, he does not learn to swim. Quite the opposite, he will not be satisfied until he has drunk the entire ocean” (Eriksen, 2001, p. 19).

²Some of these points are present in *Tyranny of the Moment*, and reworked here (Eriksen, 2001, p. 148 et seq.).

the presence of a.a. has become in everyone's everyday life. In the background, we can see the role of slowness. As Eriksen wrote in the first milestone of (his first milestone work on the?) overheating approach (2001, *Tyranny of the Moment*), if time went a bit more slowly, we would have a chance to have second thoughts, and our decisions would be based on a deeper analysis. There are numerous examples from p.64 onwards. But, for us to be able to opt for slowness, we need to protect it. This means that we need to switch consciously between fast and slow time (also collectively). Some things move fast, some move slowly. Slowness needs the support of institutions, NGOs, and so on. It must be embedded in the structure of a society where uncertainty about not having everything always under control and planned becomes a form of deceleration and a way to nurture slowness. Slowness is not a limitless positive concept, but an alternative to the mood of a.a. It could give us chance to live with a greater awareness, that would hopefully enable us to better understand the impact of our actions on others, and vice versa.

2. *All decisions exclude as much as they include.* Time is a limited resource in an accelerated world. But you need time to make a decision quickly. The development of unstable identities is just around the corner. Who am I? Who do I want to be? You may have a project for improving yourself, or you may be going somewhere and your life is like a story. You want to be part of a narrative that makes your life cohesive, and this is becoming increasingly difficult because of the uneven speed of change, and also because of certain changes underway that make it difficult to navigate. In a.a., as long as you are successful, achieving what you want as an individual, then everything is alright. But the moment you hit the wall, you lose your job, you lose your connections, then you have nobody to go to because it's all your responsibility and your life. In the context of young people, there is a trade-off here between freedom and security. Sometimes you can't have both (see Chap. 4, p. 72 et seq.). But, in a way, all the decisions you have made at a given time have led you to where you are. As a result, every decision suffers, and this is the point of no return of unstable identities.
3. *The importance of taking care of diversity in hypermodernity.* The devastating effects of overheated neoliberal global capitalism are visible throughout the biosphere in the form of species extinction and a loss of biodiversity, pollution and shortages of resources – but, most of all, and most ominously, in anthropogenic climate change (see Chaps. 1, 2, and 3, and the most recent works by Eriksen on pandemic and post-pandemic society (2020, 2021)). This is another important aspect of the overheating approach, in which we can see how the large scale affects the small scale, where small entities (*citizens in primis*) can change and adjust (or adapt) to new circumstances much faster than larger ones. The problem of the loss of diversity and the threats it poses to our Earth may engender a deeper engagement with the global environment. As Eriksen reminds us (2021), in 10 or 20 years' time perhaps, we will look back and wonder why we did not make the transition sooner. Degrowth economics may come onto the agenda in a forceful and unexpected way.

A less frantic, less overheated world may save the biosphere from disaster by slowing down climate change, but it may also rehumanize societies that have behaved like opium addicts, committed to an aimless speed at the cost of sacrificing human relations and the future.

Martina Visentin, January 2023

Have We Reached the Tipping Point?

The summer of 2022 was like nothing we had seen before. We had reluctantly become accustomed to alarmist messages from climate researchers and activists who said, for many years now, that we needed to act now, but that it was still not too late. OK, if it wasn't too late 5 years ago, perhaps we could wait for another five? Or suppose it is too late, that the climate tipping point, the point of no return, has been reached? And what if we, or our descendants, will retrospectively look to the year 2022 as the decisive year, the year in which decades of dithering, inaction and denial finally paid their dividends in the shape of an increasingly uninhabitable planet?

Already when the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report was published on 4 April 2022 (IPCC, 2022), the General Secretary of the United Nations, António Guterres, took no prisoners in his summary of its implications. In his view, the report documents 'a litany of broken climate promises' and 'a file of shame cataloguing empty pledges', referring to the contradiction between politicians' speeches and their inaction. Guterres accused them of lying and pointed to countries increasing their production of fossil fuels as the 'truly dangerous radicals' rather than the environmental activists attempting to bring fossil fuel extraction to an end.

Southern Europe got much of the publicity in early summer. Spanish vineyards were withering, the entire sector struggling in the face of droughts and heatwaves. The media gaze then shifted to the Po Valley, the richest agricultural area of Italy and home to internationally worshipped products such as Parmesan cheese, Arborio rice and Parma ham. Droughts and heatwaves continued in southern Europe, but devastating flooding also became common during this summer. The August flooding in Death Valley, one of the driest places in North America, was described by meteorologists as a 'once every 1,000 years event'. Simultaneously, deadly flooding inundated large cities in China, and by the end of the month, a third of Pakistan was under water, including areas in Baluchistan which are usually hot and parched.

Europeans have become accustomed to thinking about the incipient desertification of the driest and hottest parts of the Mediterranean, but this unusual summer, droughts and heatwaves affected most of the continent. The Rhine, which has been reliably navigable and used for trade and transport at least since Roman times, calmly flowing through lush landscapes from Switzerland to the Netherlands, began to dry out. Towards the end of August, parts of the Rhine were too shallow even for flat-bottomed barges. Similarly, in England, a state of emergency was declared, and the source of the Thames moved 15 km south.

We could go on and speak of more extreme weather events dating from 2022, from unseasonable hailstorms in New Zealand to massive flooding in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, from heat records in Svalbard to thawing permafrosts in Russia. As I write in September 2022, massive rainfall in Marche, central Italy, has led to a dozen casualties and immense damages to buildings, cars and other infrastructure. Ancona had more rain in 48 h than it usually receives in 6 months.

Seen in isolation, these weather events may be regarded as freak coincidences; seen from the planetary scale, they indicate that something important has been destabilized. It is out of control, and there will be no return to ‘normality’.

Climate change and environmental destruction are the most serious challenges to survival for our species and for others, and they display an almost uncanny pattern resemblance to other overheating phenomena.

First, the destructive effects are unintentional consequences. Nobody willed the planet to self-destruct as a result of human greed and short-sightedness. Similarly, the loss of concentration due to the smartphone, ideological polarization as a result of social media, the increase of inequality as an outcome of economic growth, and alienation as a result of personal freedom were not planned. They are forms of collateral damage.

Second, these unintentional consequences – which we see in all domains, from climate to personal identity – could have been avoided, had politics and social life been regulated by a different kind of temporality. A slower temporal regime with greater foresight and concerted efforts to keep collective memories alive would have made it possible to think and act in the long term, with care for the entire system and not just the bits of it that might generate short-term profits.

Third, the conviction that individual choice and markets are useful for solving social problems – the main message from neoliberalism – pervade, fan and explain many overheating effects. Since there is no global thermostat regulating the climate, or the spread of surveillance capitalism through information technology, or human options in an unequal world, we are left to our own devices. Governments tell us that it is our responsibility as consumers to deal with climate, and if we are unemployed, we should take a course in writing CVs and applications rather than reforming the system. The great error consists in a mistaken self-understanding where humans are seen as autonomous agents rather than nodes in a vast system of communication and exchange.

Fourth, increased speed leaves no space for reflection, systemic, holistic thinking or the slow and cumulative time of organic growth. The obsession with speed is a trueborn child of capitalism, fuelled by advances in transport and communication technologies, and resulting in unprecedented economic growth and equally unprecedented unintentional consequences, ranging from pollution of brains to pollution of waterways.

The road ahead does not consist in a return to a pre-modern state of local economies, handicrafts and the small worlds of towns and villages with limited outside contact. Rather, modernity must be taken a step further, having learned from its mistakes and appreciating the need to recover what has been lost. There cannot be a single solution to the double binds and Gordian knots produced by fossil

modernity, but some elements need to be in place for an alternative to be feasible and sustainable. These solutions need to appreciate the importance of human obligations on a par with human rights, the need to consume less and more sensibly, to rely more on regional resources and less on global ones. Survival requires cooling down, slowing down and scaling down. Having said this, it is necessary to warn of the dangers involved in any withdrawal into small, bounded worlds, self-satisfied, potentially suspicious of foreigners. Scaling down is necessary in the realm of consumption and production, but not as an alternative to the global conversation. Where language ends, violence begins. The most rewarding outcome of globalization has been the creation of a world consisting not merely of contemporaries (living at the same time) but contemporaries (sharing the responsibility for the future of our common planet). At the moment, humanity is getting the worst of both worlds: Regarding the economy, rampant globalization is destroying everything in its path; but when it comes to communication, we increasingly feel that we are divided by a shared destiny. We should strive for the very opposite: A less globalized economy, but a more globalized conversation.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen, January 2023

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