

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2016. *Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*. London: Pluto Press. 192 pp. Pb.: \$30.00. ISBN: 9780745336343.

Is the essence of anthropology indeed the study of local sociocultural specifics? Is its purpose to provide a microscopically detailed insight into the lifestyles of peoples in various parts of the world? In his most recent book, Thomas Hylland Eriksen says “no” to both questions. In a fairly short volume of fewer than 200 pages, created as the result of the project *Overheating: The Three Crises of Globalisation or an Anthropological History of the 21st Century*, Eriksen focuses on the main global issues and crises: from climate change to the accumulation of waste, and the unimagined development of information and communications technologies, whereby he lists examples from various parts of the world, interconnects them with his own ethnographic experiences and those of others, and expands them with statistical data, diagrams, and graphs. The gist of this book can be summarised in one sentence: the social world is becoming increasingly crowded, dynamic, interconnected, and subsequently uncontrollable, and is too fast to be understood and studied from merely an ethnographic approach.

The selection of references Eriksen uses to support his claims is—and he also mentions this himself in the introduction almost apologetically—fairly eclectic: he refers to anthropological, sociological, economic, biological, environmental protection, and other works, skilfully combining them with data from the internet and other media. For example, his repertoire includes the unfairly neglected anthropologist and systems theorist Gregory Bateson, he quotes biologist and paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, uses Paul Virilio’s philosophical premises, and refers to the Red Queen from Lewis Carroll’s fairytale *Through the Looking-Glass* when explaining the situation in an “overheated” world, in which we are forced to run constantly in order to stay in place. When reading this book, it seems we are flitting from one topic to another like in a helicopter, descending down from the macro-level, where we have a view of the broader community and the global consequences of human activity on this planet, to the micro-level, from where we can look into our trash can and reflect on our daily commute to work.

The first topic Eriksen delves into is the energy that we have secured in abundance, but unfortunately to the detriment of the planet on which we live. This is most evident in the use of fossil fuels, which have influenced our lifestyles since the early 19th century. Coal, oil, and natural gas extraction have left an indelible mark on the Earth and its biotopes, and thus, according to some, started a new geological age: the Anthropocene. Eriksen draws attention to the main culprits that have contributed to the overheating of the atmosphere and climate change, whereby he is especially unforgiving towards his own country (i.e. Norway), which is indirectly responsible for 3% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Rather than reducing oil extraction and adapting their lifestyles, Norwegians prefer to invest in changing the habits of the Global South. In this regard, Eriksen highlights a telling paradox of those parts of the world that have built their welfare society based on fossil fuels: sweeping problems under the rug, which is often someone else’s rug, not their own.

Over the past two decades, fossil fuels have facilitated and accelerated human

mobility. Because of relatively cheap oil and its derivatives, we can travel more frequently and over much longer distances than in the past. A typical example is the exponential growth of international tourism. According to the United Nations, 25 million people travelled abroad in 1960, 250 million in 1970, 536 million in 1995, 922 million in 2008, and in 2012 the number of international tourists exceeded one billion.

While some travel for pleasure (and because they can afford it), many are forced to leave their homes. The second type of mass migration discussed in *Overheating* is the migration of refugees, whose number is also increasing. In contrast to the largely desired tourists, they are often viewed as an anomaly in the generally overheated, albeit still relatively well-organised world. At asylum centres, into which refugees are often packed for an indefinite period, their lives often turn into nothing but waiting for residence and work permits. According to Eriksen, such 'liminal, unproductive persons' are frequently treated as 'matter out of place', just like Mary Douglas put it in *Purity and Danger* (1966). The people we do not like and who do not belong to any of the predefined categories start piling up just like dirt under our rug.

We push away not only unwanted people but also things that have already served their purpose. As Eriksen puts it, waste is the most evident, visible, and malodorous consequence of globalisation. In this shortest and perhaps least a well-developed chapter, he highlights the vicious circle of consumerism, which not only leads to an accumulation of goods but also contributes to increasingly larger waste piles, at both the micro-level of households and the planetary macro-level. The solution presented at the end of the chapter is obvious, albeit somewhat utopian: a shift from neoliberal capitalism as the predominant form of production to a circular economy promoting recycling and self-sufficiency.

The next important topic the book focuses on is the rise of the importance of cities in the modern world. Once again, Eriksen uses numbers to graphically outline the significance of urbanisation: two hundred years ago, 10% of people lived in cities; in 1960, the urban population accounted for approximately one third of the world population; in 1980, half of the world's population lived in urban areas. So how does rapid urbanisation affect our lifestyle? On the one hand, it facilitates the transfer of information and helps transcend cultural differences, and on the other, new conflicts arise among previously isolated groups that lead to an ever more rapid overheating of the world.

The last topic discussed is the information overload we have experienced during the rise of cell phones, tablets, the internet, and other technologies, which are supposed to make our lives easier, but often just make them tougher. For example, e-mail makes our communication harder rather than better and faster because we have to be available almost day and night and reply instantly to dozens of e-mails that arrive in our inboxes every day if we want to retain our social status (or even job many a time). A day without an internet connection can be a true disaster, and Eriksen describes this picturesquely using the example of people in the US who gathered in front of local McDonald's and Starbucks locations after Hurricane Sandy, which had destroyed all the infrastructure and power lines, because those were the only places where WiFi access was available. The information society chapter content follows quite closely the concept of Eriksen's *Tyranny of the Moment* published in 2001, and the overall impression is also reminiscent

of this work: a thin book that deals with big issues and spices them up with a bunch of revealing graphs, in which the curves nearly always rise steeply.

With *Overheating*, Eriksen comes close to the model of a specialist work that is accessible to masses and is at the same time essential for promoting and strengthening the scholarly discipline. A style of writing that is easy to read and convincing, an abundance of factual data, engaging real-life stories, and a pressing and current main topic connected with both the individual's everyday life and the fate of the global community—this could be a winning combination for the bestseller for which anthropology has long been waiting.

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