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Interview of the Month

Interview with Thomas Hylland Eriksen (Oslo)
conducted by Monika Palmberger

Thomas Hylland Eriksen is professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo and research director of CULCOM (Cultural complexity in the new Norway). He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Mauritius and Trinidad around questions of the politics of identity, ethnicity, nationalism and globalization.

Further information: ↘http://www.culcom.uio.no/english/
↘http://folk.uio.no/geirthe/

P: I am very happy to have the chance to talk to you today about the notion of diversity. As we noticed at our Advisory Board Meeting – here at *Schloss Ringberg* – diversity is somehow in the air. Someone even suggested that we are facing the 'age of diversity'. I don't know about that but diversity is certainly a term used extensively by politicians, in the corporate world etc. Now it is the question if it is also useful as an analytical term. But let us now start with the first question: What does diversity mean to you by way of your work and field of expertise?

E: Well, perhaps we should start by thinking about diversity as an analytical term, and then we can move to the usage of diversity in public and political discourse afterwards. As regards anthropology, one might in fact say that anthropology is the study of human diversity. Some of the most fundamental questions asked by anthropologists like myself would be: How can it be that human beings around the world, who are born with pretty much the same equipment, turn out to be so different? There is a kind of dialectics here, you might say, between acknowledging that we have the same inborn characteristics everywhere with some variation within populations, but not between populations, and yet we turn out so different in fairly systematic ways. This insight gives rise to many if not most of central problems raised in anthropology.

More specifically, in my own academic research I've been looking at diversity in a slightly different sense, in the sense of multiethnic constellations where there is a dialectic of a different kind between similarity and diversity, between the need for people to have something in common in order to create a society and in order to be able to communicate, on the one hand and on the other hand the fact of there being discrete ethnic groups with varying degrees of cultural cohesion and difference to others. So I get a lot of mileage from this concept – much of the research that I'm involved in has to do with the relationship between similarity and difference.

P: I remember that you mentioned today that the simple fact of sharing a place geographically leads to commonality of some sort.

E: Exactly, simply by living in the same place we acquire common denominators, cultural commonalities which may seem trivial but which are important for the creation of a civic sphere.

P: But on the other hand there is the act of boundary-making to highlight or create differences.

E: Indeed. But one has to distinguish here between the social and the cultural because at the cultural level – I've seen this happening in some of the societies where I have done fieldwork such as Mauritius – at the cultural level people get a lot in common simply by being exposed to the same influences. In a place like Mauritius, people from different ethnic groups go to the same schools. They listen to the same radio programmes. To some extent, they watch the same films, they go to the same shops. And increasingly they eat the same food and speak the same Creole language and so on. And at the same time, at the social level, the groups can be quite segregated. They are mostly endogamous at the level of the ethnic group. They develop stereotypes about each other and so on. So at the social level there is a lot of ethnic diversity, at the cultural level there may be less. In fact, this place often reminds me of something that V. S. Naipaul wrote about Trinidad nearly fifty years ago. He doesn't like Trinidad, you know, the place where he grew up. He feels it's an artificial place with no authenticity. And so he says that to the casual observer Trinidad may seem an extremely – I'm not sure if he uses the term diverse – an extremely diverse place, multicultural place. Whereas as a matter of fact it's just a simple philistine colonial society. And by this he means that at the cultural level people have the same petit bourgeois values whereas they appear different because they look different. That's all, to him. Of course he's not being fair, but he sees clearly the difference between cultural variation and social differentiation.

P: Let's move to the second question then: Is diversity just a zeitgeist term, a post-multiculturalism policy catchphrase as in integration and diversity policy or a corporate tool or can it be a concept that can help structure and advance social scientific analysis?

E: It's a big question. I think it's all of these things. And it means still a number of other things in other contexts. Both in the private and the public sector, diversity can just be a synonym for having a few non-white employees no matter their culture as it were. Preferably they should have the same cultures as us, but they should look different – you know, the Benetton view of the word in a sense. Which in a sense is fine, I mean it would be hard to object to a black American president, and it's fine to have people who display different external characteristics because it helps breaking down stereotypes about connections between what people look like and what they are like as it were that kind of thing. But of course it's not the same thing that we are talking about if we move to policy. In this field I think it's right that diversity has to a great extent replaced multiculturalism because multiculturalism has received a lot of bad press and it is widely seen as a failure, probably wrongly — there is a general lack of nuance in today's snappy condemnations of multiculturalism, but it seems that diversity appears to be a more harmless term, a more benign thing; and it's compatible with individualism, which is certainly part of the zeitgeist. You can be diverse at the level of your individual identity.

Some years ago, I wrote an article which contrasted diversity, as it is being used in public discourse around Europe, with difference. Difference is seen as problematic because it has to do with differences in values, social organization, religion, language – that kind of rather profound, consequential thing. Whereas diversity just tends to refer to different kinds of music and food and – you know, it depicts life as a cafeteria where you can pick and chose and mix and create your own identity out of diverse materials. So it can be understood as totally conformism with the consumerist ethos and the neo-liberalist view of the individual agent as the basic unit of society. So there is a shift here from multiculturalism, a collectivist term where you have your *Gemeinschaft* which is your community and then you try to unite at a higher systemic level at the *Gesellschaft*, but your community is a group; to a different kind of social ontology. Nowadays groups do not have rights. It's very hard to defend the view that groups should have rights because then you somehow defend the oppression of women. To me there is a baby-and-bathwater problem here since every good social scientist knows that people do not only require individual freedom but they also need security. And the main way in which people acquire security is by belonging to a kind of community. So there are some limitations to the concept in this regard, yes. But as I said, at an analytical level, it is still very useful.

P: So would you say that such a focus on diversity has the potential to blur social inequality?

E: It could. It depends on how you do it. But quite clearly, in public debate you see this happen everywhere. If you take Mauritius where Creole culture, the culture of the black population in Mauritius, has been elevated to the level of national culture. Most of the popular singers in Mauritius are Creoles. So it is seen more or less as a national culture because everything else in Mauritius comes from somewhere else – there are Chinese, Indian, European influences, but none of this is seen as truly Mauritian. So Creole music and culture is advertised by the national airline and you get cassettes or nowadays CDs with *Séga* music at the airport and that sort of things for tourists and *Séga* shows with that kind of dancing music at the big tourist hotels. Whereas at the same time, if you look at the social and economic situation, the Creoles have been losing out in virtually every way, on every criterion since the economic transformation started in Mauritius in the mid 1980s when it was turned into an industrial country almost overnight. Mauritius is such a small place that fairly minor changes can make a great difference, and so it became industrialized very quickly. Most Creoles were hardly effected by this at all. They just remained in the villages, undeveloped, often with no tap water or electricity, with no jobs and so on. At the same time as their culture was elevated to the level of national culture.

So there is a real danger here. And you can see this to some extent in the US also. I mean, think about popular American culture. Ninety percent of it is more or less black or has something to do with black people. The entire tradition of rhythmic popular music – jazz, soul, blues, rock – is black music. So you can have that kind of situation and at the same time have a society where the group that produces this "colourful diverse culture" remains underprivileged. What I'm saying really is that we have to distinguish between different aspects of social reality, I mean that one shouldn't take visual culture or creative products as a token of the entire society.

P: Let's move now to our institute. In the last couple of days, you have heard that we aim to develop research and theories spanning contemporary immigration societies and longstanding multiethnic and multireligious societies. How do you see the concept of diversity shaping this agenda or not?

E: I think it is a very good starting point. I agree with Steve Vertovec that you think the word diversity is a way of directing your gaze in a particular way. It's a lens through which to see the world. It doesn't give any answers. It doesn't even ask any precise questions but it helps you ask a different set of questions from what you would otherwise have done by realizing that unitary generalizations about a society are not valid. I mean, any generalization about what society is like stops being valid when you just move a little bit down into the social fabric, neat categories begin to bifurcate and everything gets more complicated.

I wrote about this kind of thing in my early work from Mauritius, specifically how, in some situations, the number of ethnic groups in Mauritius is four. But then in some situations it could be more than thirty. This varies contextually and situationally. From the outside Tamils and Mauritians are just seen as one ethnic group but from the inside, well you have the urban and the rural Tamils. You have the high-caste and the low-caste. You have the Christian and the Hindu and not least you have the Tamils who arrived in the 18th century and you have the Tamils who arrived in the late 19th century who were in a very different class position. So the open-ended concept of diversity helps us see all this, and it also helps us not to generalize about ethnic groups, which has been a malaise in much minority research: 'Let's go and look what the Vietnamese are like. Well, the Vietnamese are like this, that and the other.' When you say diversity, you remind yourself that there is diversity within any designated group and that boundaries are not absolute.

P: And that boundary making is not restricted to ethnicity.

E: No, exactly, suddenly you discover other distinctions which are just as imperative and situational and grouplike. We are working with this in my research program also; we use the term cultural complexity which is a kindred term to diversity. Sometimes the groups in question are not ethnic at all. I mean they're gendered or they are based on class or residence or other things.

P: Thank you. From your perspective what are a few of the key empirical, theoretical or methodological challenges currently facing diversity related research?

E: I can mention two off hand. Now, this is just from the top of my head. One is to work more systematically comparatively, which I'm glad to see that you're doing here, both historically and in contemporary world because there is so much narrow specialized research on migration, even research which doesn't look to the neighboring country. You write about Turks in Kreuzberg, but you have no idea what it is to be a Turk in Copenhagen, which is very different. Being Turkish in Denmark turns you into a Danish Turk, which is very different from being a German Turk, and there is little knowledge about these differences. We have this kind of comparison, but I could also mention the one more ambitious, wider-ranging comparisons which can tell us something ultimately about what a society is. What are the options? What are the human options for making a society? So I think that's one big priority.

Another big priority is not to limit the study of contemporary cultural complexity or diversity to ethnic complexity, but to rediscover the diversity of the majorities. Majorities studies are important, just as it can be rewarding to deconstruct the majorities and show that they are not really majorities. We haven't been too successful at home in getting people to do this kind of thing in our research programme, since we are associated with minority studies. But we've had a few projects such as one on Lutheran Christian fundamentalists on an island off the coast of Western Norway; and when we are talking about complexity or diversity, you know, these people really represent something different from the mainstream. They are a cultural minority without being an ethnic minority. From this it follows that we should look at all of society. If you want to study diversity, don't just restrict it to the minorities because then we run the risk of just reproducing the boundaries that populist politicians and the media essentialise. We are constantly reminded that there are two kinds of people in Germany: Germans and foreigners, real Germans and immigrants. It's not our job to confirm such distinctions. It's rather our job to question the received wisdom and to show that there are other ways of studying society and other questions that might be fruitful to be asked.

And thirdly, the third thing I can think of is: we should resist the current tendency to overemphasize the role of Islam because… I tried to make a programmatic statement when we started out in 2004. I said something to the effect that this is not going to be a study center about Muslim women. Because there are so many researchers doing this, and those poor women, they are so fed up with social researchers coming and knocking on their doors asking if they are oppressed: 'Do you live in an enforced marriage?' and so on. But I am quite serious about this because there is a frenzy around Islam in the public sphere now, in many West European countries, which doesn't help developing our understanding of what's going on because it entails the silencing of so many other processes that we might feel to look at. If you are interested in the rights of women why just look at Muslims? Why not look at Hindus or Catholics or Orthodox Christians or Protestants, if you want to do it in the religious way? And why not divide up society along other lines instead?

P: I guess first of all the focus on Islam helps to get funding because it's extremely policy related.

E: It's fashionable. Yes, it's fashionable, but it also shows that we could often do with a bit more intellectual imagination. It is quite important sometimes that we ask some new stupid questions and not just the old stupid questions.

P: Thank you very much, these are great closing words!

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