The magic of anthropology: Interview with Prof. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (University of Oslo)

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Thomas Hylland Eriksen is Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo. He is the author of many books, including widely used and translated textbooks in anthropology including *Small Places, Large Issues* (4th ed. 2014), *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (3rd ed. 2010), *A History of Anthropology* (2nd ed. 2010) and *What is Anthropology?* (2nd ed. 2017). He has also published extensively on identity politics, creolisation, and globalisation, and has done fieldwork on cultural complexity in Mauritius, Trinidad, and Norway. He has recently completed an ERC AdvGrant project titled *Overheating* on accelerated change, and has in this context published *Overheating; An Anthropology of Accelerated Change* (2016), *Boomtown: Runaway Globalisation on the Queensland Coast* (2018), and the co-edited *Identities Destabilised* (2016) and *Knowledge and Power in an Overheated World* (2017, both with Elisabeth Schober), as well as *Mining Encounters* (2018, with Robert Jan Pijpers). He was President of EASA 2015–2016, Vice-President 2017–2018. In 2017, he was awarded the Research Prize of the University of Oslo.

1) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (EGB) was published 50 years ago. When did you first read the book, and why?

I read it as an undergraduate back in 1982. Barth's Introduction was on the reading list for us first-year students, and it was available through a compendium of mandatory readings that we got at a good price. But I actually ended up buying the book, and was at the time especially fascinated by Harald Eidheim's chapter about Sami–Norwegian relations (Eidheim 1969), which showed that cultural differences do not generate ethnic boundaries. Eidheim was one of my teachers, and he was remarkable. He was a kind of Zen master from a small hamlet in Western Norway, who spoke little, and sometimes in riddles, but he was a major influence on me at the time. He introduced me to semiotics, showing how ethnic relations can be understood as systems of communication. Along with Gunnar Haaland's research on shifting ethnic identity in Darfur (Haaland 1969), Eidheim's work from the far north was an important source of inspiration when Barth began to work sys-

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tematically on ethnicity. That book, along with a few others, revealed some of the magic of anthropology to me: how the fusion of ethnographic knowledge with theoretical analysis can completely change your perspective on human life and the social world.

2) The book (EGB) has been translated into almost ten other languages; however, Norwegian is not among them. Nor has the "Introduction" been translated into Norwegian yet. Why?

Really? I would have thought that at least his "Introduction" was available in Norwegian, so I had to check, and you are right. A few of his other articles on ethnicity have been translated into Norwegian, but nothing from this book. However, when a collection of his articles were translated in 1994 (Barth 1994), he made the selection and did not include the Introduction to EGB. I should have asked him why, but now – alas – it is too late. Concerning the book as such, I believe that the publisher assumed, correctly, that those who were interested could read it in English.

3) EGB became a classic. Typically, its strengths are emphasised. What are, however, in your opinion, its weaknesses? What did the authors fail to address, what did they omit?

It is easy, with the hindsight of fifty years, to identify shortcomings and weaknesses which were not visible at the time. The symposium took place in 1967, just before feminist and Marxist perspectives made their entry, visibly and energetically, into mainstream Western anthropology. So, one could mention the complete lack of a gender perspective and a weak understanding of the significance of property and structural power in the book. Yet, it has to be read in its proper context, which was mid-1960s anthropology, and the main concern of the authors was to show that ethnicity is relational, situational and subject to change. This was enough of a mouthful at the time. Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* was published in 1967, a book that showed how reality is mediated through socially embedded notions and interpretations; Barth and his collaborators did very much the same thing with ethnic relations: Before EGB, ethnic identity was generally seen as fairly immutable and stable, associated with objective cultural features and based on common descent. It nevertheless turned out that the boundaries were fuzzy, myths of origin, inventions, and ethnicity an aspect of a relationship, not something that people carried within themselves.

Having said this, I think the authors could have delved more deeply into anomalies and ambiguities, borderline cases, people who do not fit in because they may be "a bit of this and a bit of that", what we today tend to think of as hybridity or creolisation. They could also have taken the study of the state more seriously, as Barth later admitted. After all, minorities are the product of state formations. It is also worth pointing out that there is hardly anything about violent ethnic conflicts in the book.

4) What lies behind the fact that one of the most influential books on ethnicity, if not the most influential one at all, was written by Scandinavian authors? Was it a mere coincidence, or is there something more?

A lot has to do with Barth himself, who was a charismatic, energetic, and inspiring animator of this event. He was also able to exert sufficient authority in the group to make the book consistent, so it comes across as a genuinely edited book, almost a joint statement. Again largely thanks to Barth, Scandinavian anthropology was at the time closely aligned with Anglophone anthropology, especially the British schools. There were some predecessors in the UK, on whose work they could draw. I am in particular thinking of Edmund Leach and his *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954), where social processes take precedence over cultural particularities in shaping a system of inter- and intra-ethnic relationships. But the Manchester School had also produced fine studies for two decades about the changing significance of "tribal identities" in a situation of rapid urbanisation in southern Africa. So EGB did not emerge out of the blue, but Barth, in particular, had a way of making pithy, powerful formulations that stuck. His language was parsimonious, his arguments logical and easy to follow, and he asked questions to his own material and that of others which might at a first glance sometimes seem naïve, but which usually turned out to be fruitful and complex.

5) Quite soon after its publishing, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* proved to be very successful and, in hindsight, it was perhaps one of the most successful books on ethnicity ever. Barth, however, did not follow this success and left the topic of ethnicity. Why?

He was a restless soul, I suppose. If you take his long career, spanning six decades, he made contributions to many branches of anthropology, from the theory of games to knowledge systems. By the time EGB was in press, he was already doing fieldwork on knowledge and ritual in highland New Guinea, an entirely new topic and empirical field for him. So Barth was not one to rest on his laurels, he continued to be a curious and open-minded scholar till the very end. Yet he did return, briefly, to EGB and the topic of ethnicity later, but only when asked to do so. A couple of his later monographs – *Sohar* (1983) and *Balinese Worlds* (1993) – do take on issues of social pluralism and cultural complexity, but largely without applying the model put forth in EGB. The main explanation is that he became increasingly interested in understanding symbols and meaning, at the expense of zero-sum games and "negotiations" aiming to gain advantages over others through transactions.

6) Barth's "Introduction" is considered to be one of the key contributions to the theory of ethnicity. For this fact, most of us would expect that "ethnicity" is on its every page. However – neither in the Introduction nor in the Barth's chapter "Pathan Identity and its Maintenance" (Barth 1969b), is the very word ethnicity ever mentioned; put simply, it is not there. So, the conviction that in his Introduction Barth writes about ethnicity is, in fact, misleading. Does not this, *inter alia*, mean that the way we understand Introduction does not correspond with its author's intentions, i.e., that we read it in a rather different way than in that it was written?

Hmm ... perhaps he didn't use the word because it had certain connotations, especially in the US, that he wanted to avoid. There, *ethnicity* was, and still is, used about relatively

fixed, bounded group identities – as in "your ethnicity is Ukrainian". In EGB, by contrast, ethnicity comes across, dynamically, as a relationship and a process, that which emerges between and contributes to shaping personal or group identities. This means that we cannot speak of e.g. Turkish ethnicity, but of Turkish–German or Turkish–Danish ethnicity; and since it is relational, the two kinds of relationships are distinct and contribute to creating different Turkish selves, depending on whether they live in Germany or Denmark. Harald Eidheim was very clear about this, I recall, when he gave lectures on ethnicity for advanced undergraduates, but he, too, mainly spoke of "ethnic relations" to avoid reification.

7) Today, Fredrik Barth is one of the best known Norwegian anthropologists. What was his position within the Norwegian anthropological community?

He was a massive presence, a big fish in a small pond. You know, John Barnes, the originator of network analysis in social anthropology, did fieldwork in Western Norway and knew the scene in the 1950s well. He once quipped that you could count the number of Norwegian anthropologists on a mutilated hand. So in these formative years, until the mid- to late 1960s, there were few modern social anthropologists in Norway, to say the least. The descriptive, nation-building tradition of ethnology was still strong, and a globally oriented, comparative study of culture, to the extent that it existed in the country, was weak, eclectic and often out of tune with international developments. All this changed when Barth set up the department in Bergen. He invited famous anthropologists, mainly from the UK and the US, as visiting professors and guest lecturers, insisted that the students read up on the latest monographs and journal articles, and served in those early years as a window to the world. Largely thanks to his prestige and efforts, anthropology began to grow outside of Bergen as well; the Oslo department was thriving, attracted students and research funding, and in Tromsø, a small, but energetic department of anthropology produced fine studies of cultural complexity in the far north. This included, incidentally, not merely Norwegian–Sami relations, but also diversity within the Sami population as well as Kvens, people of Finnish origin who had settled in Finnmark in the 19th century or earlier.

Everybody had to read Barth. Having said this, it must be added that he could also come across as a tall tree throwing shade over the lesser plants surrounding it. His comparative lack of political engagement was controversial in the highly politicised atmosphere of the 1970s, and especially the young Marxists were deeply critical of his tendencies towards methodological individualism. Also, after leaving Bergen in the early 1970s, he worked mainly with a handful of younger colleagues and did not teach. His relations to the Oslo anthropologists was complicated. Not least for this reason, I and many others were very pleased when he accepted a small part-time position at the Oslo department in the early 2000s. We had seen little of him in the 1980s and 1990s and were finally able to give him a bit of the recognition he deserved.

8) It is common that people think F. Barth was your teacher. Was it really so? If not, who actually was your teacher/s? What was your relationship with F. Barth?

I guess this assumption stands to reason, given that I have also done research on ethnicity and complex societies. However, I didn't really know Barth until I had nearly completed my PhD in 1991. He had been a remote figure, even if his office was at the Ethnographic Museum, just half a dozen tram stops from my department. Owing to the somewhat fraught relationship with the department in Oslo, he rarely showed up unless the students asked him to give a talk, which we occasionally did.

Later in the 1990s, I got to know Barth better, but we never developed the kind of close relationship you sometimes get with colleagues you see every day or collaborate with. So if he was my teacher, and I suppose in many ways he was, it was a long-distance teacher-student relationship. He may have seen me as a long-distance student as well. After all, he sat on two committees in the Norwegian Research Council that funded my research at different times, and without those grants, I would probably not have ended up as an anthropologist.

9) In 2015, you published a book *Fredrik Barth: An Intellectual Biography*; what was Barth's opinion about your presentation of his "intellectual life"? Were there topics/events where you disagreed?

Oh yes, and we both enjoyed a good disagreement. Actually, a former student of mine, Lars Laird Iversen, recently coined the term "community of disagreement" in order to say something about the nature of a healthy pluralist democracy. Often, it can be disagreement that holds a community or society together; it gives you something to talk about, and if it can be handled in a civilised manner, disagreement can be the very glue of a society. With Fredrik, I often took exception to his tendency to assume that people were more or less as rational as himself. My view tends to be that we often act without thinking about the consequences, that we are a bit more stupid than he believed. My view of history and structural forces shaping people's lives is also different from his and is indebted to people like Bourdieu, Giddens, and Foucault. Fredrik had a tendency to zoom in on concrete individuals and their activities, and I felt that he sometimes missed the larger picture as a result.

By the way, it was only when we began to collaborate on this book that we became close in the sense that we got to know and respect each other not just as colleagues, but as human beings sharing a passion for understanding the human condition.

10) What was the key incentive for you to write a biography of Fredrik Barth?

Well, I thought it was about time that someone did. He had turned 80 in 2008, and his contributions to anthropology had been massive and diverse. Personally, I had come to realise that I was carrying out a lifelong dialogue with his ideas; sometimes disagreeing strongly, as with his early transactionalism and theory of games models, but also often feeling inspired and boosted by his thoughts. Luckily, both Fredrik and his anthropologist wife Unni Wikan thought it was a feasible project.

11) As you mention (Eriksen 2015: 3), one of Barth's ancestors was Saxon. Granted that Fredrik Barth considered himself and was considered by others to be Norwe-

gian, a crossing of ethnic boundary and a related change of ethnic identity (though, presumably, intergenerational) must have occurred in his own family. Had he ever mentioned this case while discussing the topic of change of ethnic identities?
Not really. The Germans, Dutchmen, and Danes who came to Norway before the nation-state, often as traders, administrators or specialists, were fully assimilated, frequently into the upper classes. Having a German-sounding surname even today signifies urban, bourgeois belonging, but not foreignness. There was little of the current quest for purity at the time. Many Norwegians from the West and North coasts are quite dark – we have fewer blond people than they do in Sweden – owing to the fisheries, which attracted skippers from the Mediterranean. My own dad, who was born in Tromsø in the far north, was tall and dark, and if he didn't shave in the morning, he'd look like an Italian mafioso in the afternoon. Today, with inexpensive DNA testing – which, of course, says nothing about your cultural or social identity – and a quest for purity which is growing stronger by the day, not least in Europe, the situation is changing. It has become easier to migrate, but more difficult to assimilate.

12) What brought you to the study of ethnicity? Why did ethnicity become one of your key research topics?
It was almost a coincidence. My first proper fieldwork took place in Mauritius in 1986, and although this is an ethnically complex island, I had intended to study something else. The Creoles, that is people of mainly African and Malagasy origin, had not been studied ethnographically. So I set out to do an ethnography of their social organisation and cultural worlds, seen on the broader canvas of the history of slavery and plantation society as well as the complex situation in Mauritius, where Hindus are the largest group, and the Creoles have been economically and politically marginalised for decades.

But, as so often happens in anthropology, my research questions changed as I went along. In the Creole fishing village where I settled for the first few months, there were hardly any Hindus or Muslims, and yet, people read almost everything that happened in society through an ethnic lens. They were, among other things, convinced that they were disadvantaged because the land reforms earlier in the century had mainly benefitted Hindus, and that they received very little government support because of their ethnic identity. So you might say that ethnicity came to me, not the other way around. In the end, I decided to focus on the intergroup relations, the arenas where ethnic identity was expressed and reproduced, as well as social fields where the importance of ethnicity was reduced, such as the tourism industry and industrial workplaces. The main focus in the end became the tension between group identities and an overarching national identity.

And so, you might say, I continued on this track for many years, later doing fieldwork in Trinidad asking similar research questions, and directing research programmes in Norway looking at some of the implications of immigration and multiculturalism here. It has been a rewarding journey, but I should perhaps point out, for the sake of completeness, that I have also done other things. My recent work, for one thing, concerns local responses to accelerated change, and right now, I'm writing a follow-up of sorts to a book I wrote in 2001 called *Tyranny of the Moment*, about the ways in which information

technology affects our perception of time. So much has changed since 2001; so much remains the same.

13) As you have mentioned in your texts (cf. Eriksen in this volume), "ethnicity" today exists (at least) at two levels: the level of an analyst and that of informants; Jean and John Comaroff write about the commodification of ethnicity (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009). What does it mean for us, as scholars? Has not the concept of "ethnicity" lost its analytical usability due to this shift?

The book by the Comaroffs is absolutely wonderful. They identify something that many had thought about, but not studied systematically, namely a shift from politicised to commercialised identity. If you can sell your myths, handicrafts, food and so on through various forms of cultural tourism, that may under certain conditions be more gratifying than continuously appealing to the state for economic support and political recognition. So well, no, I don't agree that the term has lost its usefulness because of this development. On the other hand, we should look more broadly at group identities. Locking the path of inquiry to one kind of identity based on putative common descent and notions of shared culture may turn out to be a straitjacket in a world where identities form on many criteria. Yet, ethnicity is not going away. It is, you might say, intermediate between kinship and race. It is being revitalised across Europe now, as a counterforce against a non-ethnic identity, namely Islam, and in many parts of Africa, ethnic identities have in fact been strengthened, and not just in the benign, commercial ways, in recent years. So if we need a larger toolbox, and I think we do, ethnic relations still have to be prominently placed in there.

14) Which interesting works on ethnicity have been published in recent years? Is there any topic you think deserves to be studied?

Perhaps we should expand the field a little. First of all, we should see ethnicity in tandem with nationalism. There are scholars of nationalism, such as the late A.D. Smith, who have argued that all viable nationalisms have an ethnic core. This could be contested – there are, arguably, countries with strong national identities where the ethnic element is weak or even non-existent; I am in particular thinking of the Republican tradition from the French Revolution. Secondly, we might want to include other kinds of identity politics as well, which are in some parts of the world far more visible and powerful than ethnicity. I am especially thinking of politicised religion and the discourses around multiculturalism. Finally, and I guess this is my own hobby-horse, muddled boundaries, hybridity and creolisation should also be included in an overall assessment of the field.

And naturally, there are lots of excellent books in all these fields. I'm a great fan of Douglas Holmes' *Integral Europe*; although it was published in the year 2000, it goes a long way to explaining the rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe. From another part of the world displaying comparable ideological dynamics, Martha Nussbaum's book about Hindu nationalism, *The Clash Within*, from 2007, is an outstanding analysis of the currently predominant ideology in Indian politics, namely *hindutva* or "Hindu-ness". It is in many ways odd that the rise of militant Hindu nationalism has somehow gone under

the radar for many foreign observers, who are unable to see that Prime Minister Modi is a dangerous man with a violent past. To return to anthropology, a third book that I'd like to mention is Carlos Londoño Sulkin's monograph *People of Substance* from 2012. It is not just about ethnicity, but the author does a great job in problematising the concept of the ethnic boundary by showing that the people he's been studying, in the Amazonian region of Colombia, have complex patterns of marriage, residence and personal identity, with no clear boundaries between groups, yet at the same time pretty clear criteria for belonging.

15) What are the 10 best books on ethnicity according to Thomas Hylland Eriksen? That's a hard one ... there are so many excellent books in this area ... But let me mention the first that come to my mind. Any of the three I've just mentioned might have been included.

J. Clyde Mitchell: *The Kalela Dance* (1956). This short monograph is very rich and ahead of its time through its focus on the changing significance of ethnicity and its emphasis on its symbolic expressions.

Fredrik Barth, ed.: *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969) – well, we've already spoken about its merits.

Abner Cohen, ed.: *Urban Ethnicity* (1974). A product of the Manchester School, Abner Cohen wrote important ethnographic studies from Israel, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and London, all with a focus on identification. This edited volume, with contributions from several leading Africanists and others, uses a mainly utilitarian approach to show how ethnic symbols and kinship can be manipulated to serve political ends in a situation of fast urbanisation.

A. P. Cohen: *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985). A beautifully written short book, with examples largely from the North Atlantic, this monograph powerfully shows how symbols not only create social reality but also are meaningful in themselves as foci of belonging; there is an interesting complementarity here with the other Cohen. Incidentally, the two Cohens often received each other's mail while both were working at the University of Manchester.

Maryon McDonald: *We Are Not French!* (1990) In the late 1980s, a number of Edwin Ardener's students in Oxford carried out studies of minority identity movements on the European fringe, and this study of Breton ethnic revitalisation is both excellent and representative of the clutch of monographs emerging from this period just before the end of the Cold War.

Rogers Brubaker: *Ethnicity Without Groups* (2004) This is a multiscalar work by a sociologist with a keen interest in history and ethnography, and while it tells the reader quite a bit about the collective identities at work in Romania and neighbouring countries, its main thrust consists in its warning against "groupism" or the assumption that people primarily identify in stable ways with groups.

Jean and John Comaroff *Ethnicity, Inc.* (2009) Although the Comaroffs were not the first to write about the commercialisation of ethnic identity, their book is to date the most comprehensive treatment of this shift from the political to the pecuniary. And it serves as an excellent point of departure for further research, their examples being mainly

from Southern Africa.

Richard Jenkins: *Being Danish* (2012). This is a pretty interdisciplinary book, drawing on archival research as well as surveys, media controversies and ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish town, and while it takes the Barthian perspective as its point of departure, it moves beyond it in depicting, in great detail, the many layers of Danishness, ranging from historical events to the minutiae of everyday life.

Ralph Grillo: *Living with Difference* (2015) Ralph Grillo wrote about national identities in Europe as early as 1980, and he has been an important contributor to the interdisciplinary discourse about diversity, boundaries, and identities for many years. This book brings together many of his recent articles, showing the breadth and depth of his engagement with the issues, ranging from media debates in the UK to the history of the Ottoman Empire.

I think I'll leave the final slot open. So many great scholars and thinkers could be mentioned, and many of the people who have inspired me the most in this area ended up never publishing a book with ethnicity as its main focus.

Anyway, thank you both for your excellent questions and for this wonderful conversation!

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