

Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1962-2024): A Personal Account

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Thomas Hylland Eriksen was my friend. For two decades, we communicated, met in different places, organized panels and workshops, and discussed different issues. I was also lucky to meet (first at a dinner at his house in 2004) his wonderful family – he was very proud of them (and with very good reason).

One of the occasions where I assisted him was the 2017 SIEF conference in Göttingen. Still very weak from the disease, Thomas was member of the EASA Executive, and contributed a panel to the EASA conference, dedicated to “Clashing Scales of Infrastructural Development”. Thomas was in charge of it, and I helped as a co-convenor. He had been operated on some six months earlier and was still very weak. A short time after his surgery, we were discussing the differences between the set lists at two King Crimson concerts – he saw them in late September in Oslo (literally days before the surgery), and I saw them in early October in Hamburg. Both of us followed the trajectories of King Crimson over the years, so it was important to “compare notes” about the latest incarnation of this magnificent “prog-rock” band.

Thomas was also a saxophone player (with a local band, Gentle Knife), but he saw himself as a teacher and promoter of anthropology. “The world needs more social anthropologists”, he would say. An anthropological point of view permeated all that he did – his most widely cited (and translated) book, *Small Places, Large Issues* (2022a [1995]), grew out of his desire to promote understanding between different cultures, different peoples, and different points

of view. His approach was comparative, beginning with his early fieldwork in Mauritius and Trinidad. His mind was open to new challenges and new points of view, but he also saw a need to systematize available knowledge and present it in a way that would be accessible not only to students, but to general audience as well, like his book on *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (originally published in 1993), but also the (relatively) recently updated *What is Anthropology?* (2017).

Thomas the teacher was also a promoter of basic human values – beginning from the local level (he even tried local-level politics) but going from the studies of his own country, Norway (the Cultural Complexity project), to the global project about overheating (Eriksen 2016, 2018). The fate of the world was very much his concern, but in order to understand what was going on, one needs to carefully examine different processes and different situations, and then put it to the public. His last fieldwork was in northern Australia, but the overheating project gathered a group of scholars who did research all around the globe. Concern about climate change is a global problem, and it could be fully comprehended only on a global scale. While he tended to agree with me that humans cannot destroy the planet (the planet will recuperate), but only themselves, his comment was: “But it would be nice to have someone around to write about it”.

Thomas the educator was also very much present in the everyday life of his own country. He actively contributed to debates, both as a journalist and as a commentator, and he did so in a variety of media. He was, quite deservedly so, one of the most prominent public intellectuals in Norway. Thomas was also always willing to help others with his insights – for example, after a deadly earthquake near Fukushima in 2011, he immediately answered my request to provide an anthropological comment about disasters (and how humans react to it), for a Belgrade weekly magazine, *NIN*.

Thomas’s generosity is something that has been frequently commented about in the days after his passing. He had a sense of empathy with younger scholars and was always willing to help them, sometimes even travelling to “peripheral” places (like the University of Donja Gorica in Montenegro, in 2018), only to promote anthropological involvement to the world. He lived a full life, as it would be called by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. With his work and apparently endless energy, he managed to touch so many other lives, demonstrating how understanding other people and other points of view enriches the world.

Thomas served as the EASA president in 2015–16 and was also member of the Executive Committee until 2018. As someone who saw this organization form and grow, he was very much concerned about the recent developments (he was one of its ten former members who wrote an open letter protesting some recent decisions by the Executive Committee). On 3 December 2023, he wrote to me to express his concern “that the EASA Exec has been taken over, owing to skilful manoeuvring and lobbying (...) But the idea that we should be a radical political organisation is alien to most of us, I believe, including those who share the views” (from an e-mail sent to me on Monday 4 December). As weak as he was at the last stage of his fight with cancer, Thomas was still an optimist, willing to fight for a better outcome. I did

not share his optimism with regard to EASA but found his enthusiasm commendable.

Understanding others and other people's viewpoints and perspectives is how we met, back in April 2003 in Grahamstown (South Africa). He was a visiting fellow at Rhodes University, where I had just been appointed a senior lecturer. During one of our walks, on a cold windy rainy Sunday, he suggested organizing something dedicated to “non-central” anthropologies for the EASA conference in Vienna in 2004. This led to the edited volume *Other People's Anthropologies* (Bošković and Eriksen 2008), to which Thomas made himself an important contribution (Eriksen 2008). It was also a reflection of his ongoing interest in the history of anthropology, which was noticeable in his and Finn Sivert Nielsen's *A History of Anthropology* (2001) and, more recently, as he was working on a book about W. H. R. Rivers, one of the ancestors who decisively shaped the beginnings of our discipline – but also in his contribution to the excellent volume on *Ethnographers Before Malinowski* (Rosa and Vermeulen 2022).



Fig. 1

Thomas Hylland Eriksen interviewed by Alan Macfarlane, 13 June 2019, reprinted with permission.

Link: <https://www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/3012337>

Thomas Hylland Eriksen was a unique person, “a rare flower”, as put by one of his colleagues from the Department of Social Anthropology in Oslo, Thorgeir Kolshus. According to the Norwegian research and higher education minister Oddmund Hoel, “Thomas Hylland Eriksen was a true intellectual, who impressed, irritated and engaged”. He was in true sense an engaged anthropologist (as suggested by the title of his 2005 book, *Engaging Anthropology*), committed to his own community as well as to wider issues. However, his last books were published in Norwegian, his native language: *Syv meninger med lifet* (Seven Meanings of Life, 2022) and *Det umistelige: fra global ensretting til et nytt mangund* (The Indispensable: Global Unification and the New Diversity, 2024).

His work was recognized with many awards, like the Vega Medal from the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography (SSAG) in 2022 – anthropology's equivalent to the Nobel Prize. I can only hope that the ideas that Thomas Hylland Eriksen advocated will continue to

have influence, and that more people will strive to make the world a better place.

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