



MAX PLANCK INSTITUTE
FOR SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Realeurasia, Realdonaldtrump, Realoverheating

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Overheating in Oslo

For me it has been a pleasure and a privilege to play a minor supporting role over the last five years in a major project of my friend Thomas Hylland Eriksen: “Overheating. The Three Crises of Globalization. An Anthropological History of the Early 21st Century” (European Research Council Advanced Grant, 2011). Overheating is a metaphor which Eriksen and his co-researchers apply not only to environmental issues but also to neoliberal political economy and to the collective identities of human communities. In empirical projects on every continent (except Antarctica), they have investigated the complex interrelationships between these three dimensions of accelerating planetary transformation, and their uneven consequences for peoples and regions. In presenting provisional results in a seminar at the *Litteraturhuset* in Oslo on 1st June 2017, the PI highlighted two books which have already been published.¹ Other volumes and special issues are in the pipeline. Eriksen stressed that the formal conclusion of this megaproject was not so much an end-point as a transition to further, follow-up research. Certainly his “Overheating” agenda is every bit as urgent today as when – with extraordinary perspicacity – he launched the project in 2011-2012.

The central themes were echoed later in the evening at a public session in which Tania Li and Jean Comaroff presented insights into their new work (collaborative projects with James Ferguson and John Comaroff respectively). When Eriksen joined the lecturers on stage for the final discussion, it struck me that Norway must be one of the few countries in the world where citizens will gladly give up a beautiful summer evening to participate in public anthropology. As we were leaving, however, John Comaroff confided fresh news from the White House: President Donald Trump had just announced his country’s withdrawal from the Paris climate agreements of 2015.

Eurasia in Halle

My own ERC project “Realising Eurasia” has benefited greatly from Eriksen’s inspiration. Of course, our agenda in Halle is different. Whereas “Overheating” explicitly tackles the planet, we content ourselves with investigations of its largest landmass. Moreover we concentrate on just one dimension, that of economy. Our researchers focus on small (especially family-owned) businesses; ecological and identity issues are not central concerns. But our economic anthropology is nonetheless a broad undertaking. We pay attention not only to contemporary political economy (“neoliberalism”) but also to the moral and religious background as formed over the *longue durée* of Eurasian history. We ask whether, irrespective of recent experiences of capitalism and socialism, economic organization is still shaped by long-term civilizational factors. Our premise in this respect is civilizational diversity. At the same time, suspicious of “continentalism” and the continued distortions of Eurocentrism in the social sciences, we are constantly on the lookout for parallels and similarities between civilizations (or families of civilizations) across Eurasia.

As followers of this blog since its inception in 2014 well know, a historically informed project of this kind raises questions concerning geopolitical constellations and their societal underpinnings in the present. To put the key question very bluntly: if it can be agreed that Eurasia exhibits a high degree of structural unity as well as civilizational diversity, then why has Western Eurasia (i.e. Europe, or rather the more limited Europe represented by the EU) been aligned politically and militarily for so long with North America, and not with Russia, India and China?

Some of our critics complain that, even if the commonalities of the distant Eurasian past are valid up to a point, there can be no justification for privileging Eurasia today, in a world which in recent centuries has become thoroughly globalised (as Thomas Hylland Eriksen himself has demonstrated in countless publications). Donald Trump’s announcement has attracted ire from all around the world, not just from the old societies of Eurasia. Nevertheless, for me the most recent developments in the USA are an aid in answering critics and in illuminating the deeper significance of our Eurasia concept (at the same time as they confirm the prescience of Eriksen’s imagery of “overheating”).

In recent years the most striking example of US exceptionalism has been the controversy surrounding Obamacare. Following a democratic election, it now seems certain that millions of citizens of the world’s most wealthy and powerful state will lose access to basic health insurance. This is unprecedented. Elsewhere, most effectively in Western Eurasia and later throughout the world, the trend to *expand* the entitlements of social citizenship has been consistent. It has roughly kept pace with developments of scale and complexity in other spheres. More recently, the trend to take seriously the cause of environmental sustainability has gained momentum all over the world. President Trump seems determined to buck this

trend, too. Since this policy is supported by the leadership of the Republican Party, not to mention millions of voters, it can hardly be dismissed as personal eccentricity.

Universalist values such as environmental conservation and inclusive citizenship emerged in the course of societal developments in Eurasia since the urban revolution of the Bronze Age. Through innumerable vicissitudes, in many locations, such ideals have a continuous, connected history. This was long characterized by what Jack Goody calls “alternating leadership” between East and West.ⁱⁱ In the twentieth century this history was strongly marked by contrasting experiences of socialism: social-democratic in the west and generally more repressive elsewhere. This is the background of our “Realising Eurasia” project in the new century.

Rethinking mental maps

Eurasian connectivity stretching back thousands of years has given rise to structural similarities but, of course, not to socio-cultural homogeneity. The diversity is immense. Intra-Eurasian differences have persisted in the era of modern industry, following the fossil fuels revolution. The legacies of millennia of intra-Eurasian warfare are still with us, above all in the “Middle East”.

But might this era be coming to an end? The Cold War was ostensibly concluded in the early 1990s, but many Western politicians remain in thrall to the old mental maps. During his first visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels, even Donald Trump, who had previously declared NATO to be obsolete, was caught on camera elbowing aside the representative of the newest member of this alliance (Montenegro) in order to claim his rightful position at the centre of the group photograph. Of course, having already committed the US to increased military expending, Trump now wants other NATO members to do the same. But why on earth should they?

Mental maps are resilient by definition but profound rethinking is surely overdue. The Cold War generated a gross classification of “three worlds”. The notion of a “third world” has been replaced by an even grosser classification of “Global South”. The effects are often comic. It makes no more sense to think of China as “South” at meetings of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee than it does to view Chinese investments in Africa as an instance of “South-South cooperation”. The rise of China is better understood as a continuation of the long-term Eurasian pendulum. What makes our moment in history unique is that, for the first time, there is a possibility to forge a political unity on the foundation of millennia of socio-cultural parallels and structural affinities. That is why the agreement of EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Brussels on the day after President Trump’s announcement was potentially so significant. These crucial macro-regions have so far

failed to make much progress in formulating a new world economic order that would confine the market principle to its proper place, in the manner of the great Eurasian empires of the past. But the harmony between Beijing and Brussels concerning the Paris agreement could still mark a step in this direction, one that will eventually have to include all the other power centres of Eurasia.

The real significance of Donald Trump

There is a widespread and readily understandable tendency (especially among liberal intellectuals) to view every new policy statement from the White House as mere posturing and bluster, as the theatrical performance of a philistine boor to gratify his voting base; the nightmare will be over soon, it is said, and life will return to normal; things will cool down. Is this diagnosis correct, or is it perhaps complacent? Do the excesses of Trump enable anything more substantial than scarcely warranted sentiments of moral superiority elsewhere, accompanied by cheap anti-American jibes? Might the global political climate as well as the environment become even more overheated in the months and years ahead?

Anthropologists can seek answers to such questions by continuing Thomas Hylland Eriksen's agenda, e.g. by investigating the material and identity concerns of Trump's voters, and by analysing the very real consequences of theatre states in the era of globalization.ⁱⁱⁱ Even if many conscientious state governors, mayors, academics and ordinary decent US citizens repudiate their President and do everything in their power to ensure that the goals of the Paris accords are met, the symbolic message has been sent. Realdonaldtrump is not just an entertainment, to be abhorred or applauded according to taste. In some respects the world has been here before, notably under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Yet the Trump phenomenon seems qualitatively different. It has generated a new moral geography for the planet, one that is irredeemably out of kilter with present geopolitical cartography.

Meanwhile some of us will continue to analyse a level of material reality that is distinct (but certainly not entirely detached) from that of theatrical imaginaries. Following Trump's announcement on 1st June, the Dow Jones and other financial indexes around the world rose to record heights. This US President surely takes his voters seriously enough to know that he cannot afford an economic recession. But the issue is much deeper than US economic nationalism. Never has the contradiction between long-term human flourishing and the short-term profitability drive of capitalism been as stark as it is today. This capitalism is above all a product of Eurasian history. It remains to be seen whether a revival of Eurasian connectivity can lead to a taming of capitalist markets, to their more balanced harnessing in frameworks of effective regulation and redistribution, for the sake of our species and our planet.

Notes

ⁱ Thomas Hylland Eriksen. 2016. *Overheating. An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*. London: Pluto. Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Elisabeth Schober. (eds.), 2016. *Identity Destabilised. Living in an Overheated World*. London: Pluto. See also the project's website: <http://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/overheating/>

ⁱⁱ Jack Goody. 2010. *The Eurasian Miracle*. Cambridge: Polity.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Clifford Geertz. 1980. *Negara: The Theatre State in 19th Century Bali*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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