

## **Overheating, or “what happens when we rub our hands without a built-in thermostat”**

**Review by Imola Püsök**

*Overheating: An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*

by Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Pluto Press, 2016

In the title of the first chapter, Thomas Hylland Eriksen cites Lévi-Strauss: “Le monde est trop plein”. In a very illustrative picture, this sentence summarizes *Overheating*, which according to the subtitle, is an anthropology of accelerated change. It is a book about climate change and the environment, about urbanization and improvisational survivalism, tourism and migration, waste and inequality, excess and deprivation, based on the assumption that these “rapid changes characterizing the present age have important, sometimes dramatic, unintended consequences” (vii). A focus on contradictions is at the heart of the investigation – contradictions that are underlying the crises of globalization. When studying these crises, we are “confronted with a series of clashing scales which remain poorly understood” (viii), rather than with malevolent intentions or any evil conspiracy. In this book, the author looks for paradoxes, contradictions, clashes of scale and runaway processes, in an attempt to account for the recent failure of the standard modern narrative about progress and development (ix).

We live in an overheated world, a world that is too intense and too hot due to the frictions and tensions resulting from global neoliberalism, the fossil fuel hegemony and its accompanying environmental problems (132). We live in a world of accelerated growth (of population and energy use), and – despite prophecies that stated otherwise – history did not end with the fall of the Iron Curtain, but rather, it too accelerated. There are continually intensifying and vibrating tensions between human needs and ecological downfall, between growth and lack, and between those with and those without access to energy and resources. The consequences of large-scale decision-making have to be dealt with on a local

level, and local actions may have impacts on a global scale. We are no longer far enough from the other side of the world, nor small or large enough to evade the benefits and burdens of the globalized world. We have, therefore, become more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. This does not mean, that the world has become (or is becoming) homogenous. Instead, globalization “highlights a tension, typical of modernity, between the system world and the life-world, between the standardized and the unique, the universal and the particular” (7).

The book is composed of eight chapters. Chapter 2 is a conceptual inventory, where the author defines the analytical terms (double-bind, flexibility, runaway processes and treadmill syndromes, and reproduction), the descriptive terms (Anthropocene, neoliberalism) and the sorting device (scale) through which this study of contemporary modernity took place. The next five chapters are tuned to the primary sources of the current crises of globalization, namely energy use (Chapter 3), mobility (Chapter 4), urbanization (Chapter 5), waste production (Chapter 6) and the unmanageable flow of information (Chapter 7). Eriksen calls these markers of the Anthropocene overheating processes, i.e. processes that have a series of unintended (and often unwanted) consequences, and which produce an incredibly varied range of local responses. In my reading, not only are these overheating processes interconnected, but they are themselves constructed as elaborate sets of multiple structural oppositions, where the divides usually lie along the lines of access, influence, and the North-South opposition.

It is perhaps self-evident, but a striking commonality of all these overheating processes is, that they can be described with the help of a growth curve. We talk of growth in energy use, growth in international tourist arrivals, the growth of cities, growth in tones of yearly waste per capita, and growth of digital pictures taken per year. They are all exponential, unmanageable, and unsustainable. They are all in motion, pointing upward, accelerating. What the curves do not show, but the author so insightfully points out, however, are all the instances where actors on varying scales are obstructed from participating in the overheating processes. Although theoretically, through the increasing interconnectedness globalization has the potential to standardize, there are parts of the world, communities, groups and individuals who stagnate, who remain stuck in transitory states. “Overheating processes tend to imply the cooling down of places, activities or domains.” (59) In other words, increasing automation means jeopardizing certain livelihoods, heightened mobility means traffic jams and – in more extreme cases – being contained in refugee camps, growing cities produce shanty towns and experience infrastructural insufficiencies, and the speeding accumulation of information creates an overload.

Whereas the middle chapters discuss the individual overheating processes, the first and the last ones tackle the big questions, namely the central double bind of economic growth and ecological sustainability, and the problem of clashing scales (i.e. life can only be lived locally, but has to be understood globally), and the anthropological inquiry (i.e. how this overheated world can be studied). Interconnectedness and scale are key to our modernity both on an empirical and on an analytical level. On the one hand, *Overheating* is not merely about climate change and global warming. It is also about the uncontrollable proliferation of all the interconnected runaway processes, such as the growth in world population, and the simultaneous but more rapid growth in energy consumption, the politics of waste production and waste reduction, growing cyber and physical interdependence, and the increase in mobility. Not only does ‘overheating’ have consequences for the climate, it also has social implications, determines and is determined by power relations, defines the market and democracy, and inspires ideological and ecological movements (groups engaged in alterglobalisation). Yet, all these aspects are linked to the central double bind of economic growth and ecological sustainability, to the fact that everything is measured in growth curves.

On the other hand, *Overheating* is about scale. Instead of speaking about a clash of civilizations in an attempt to understand the contemporary world, it would be more instructive and versatile to make sense of the clashing scales (132). This also has consequences for analysis. It is necessary to explore how the crises of globalization are being dealt with in local contexts, “what strategies for survival, autonomy and resistance are being developed” (16). The author argues that due to our dependence on social and economic networks on a transnational scale, it is no longer useful or meaningful to distinguish between small- and large-scale societies, but instead, it may be more instructive to distinguish between systems or activities operating on different levels of scale (45-46). Alternative, green communities are, for example, absorbed by global capitalism, without capitalism changing its course, despite both global and local discontent(s) with regards to the effects of the neoliberal free market (“the iron grip of corporate power”) and of high-scale politics (49).

As Eriksen points out, globalization also has significant consequences for our discipline and our methods. The world has, “almost in its entirety, been transformed into a single – if bumpy, diverse and patchy – moral space, while the anthropologists had been busy looking the other way” (5). Cultural relativity can, therefore, no longer be an excuse for not engaging with the world in an era where professed neutrality “becomes in itself a political statement” (5). For an anthropological study of accelerated change this means, that we need to transcend the limitations of studying only the local, but

without falling on the other side of the horse. The author suggests that we “build the confrontation between the universal and the particular as a premise into the research design (6). Anthropology as a discipline, and we, anthropologists as (social) scientists must allow for new, transdisciplinary theoretical approaches, and supplement our key method – ethnography – with sufficient contextual knowledge (historical, statistical, macrosociological) in order to fully understand the complexities of the globalized world.

Although the text is defined only as an “overture and an overview” in the preface, as a reader and reviewer, I was impressed with (and startled by) the clarity and meticulousness with which it is presented. The concepts are well-defined, the overarching narrative is clear and consistent, and the clashes of scale and runaway processes that underlie the current global crises are thoroughly explained. In reading, one does not feel the burden or liberty of interpretation but is flooded by the multitude and layers of information that so aptly contour the concept and project of *Overheating*. Could – apart from the writing style of the author – this change in the mode and scope of producing anthropological narratives also be subtly linked to the rapid changes in the world we study? Are the writing (and reading) aesthetics of the “good old days of widow burning and cannibalism” not suitable for capturing and understanding the accelerating dynamics of the twenty-first century? In this book, Thomas Hylland Eriksen tackles not only the small places and large issues anthropologists encounter when studying the effects of globalization but also addresses the methodological and theoretical dilemmas they are faced within the process.

#### References Cited

Eisenstadt, S. N. 2000. *Multiple Modernities*. Daedalus. 129 (1), pp. 1-29.

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