



## ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Review by Daniel Cidrelius

*What is Anthropology?*

By Hylland Eriksen, Thomas. 2017. London: Pluto Press

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In his book *What is Anthropology?* Thomas Hylland Eriksen, the globally recognized educational father of anthropology, gives his perspective on the constitution of anthropology and the way in which anthropologists have explored how individuals make sense of the world. The reader could see this book as a vividly visualized introduction to the power of the anthropological craft. It expands perspectives on social lives and cultural phenomena. In its entirety, the book contains the keys to an anthropological world with potential to change the lives of the readers setting out to explore it. I will argue that Eriksen's book could be read as an introduction to anthropology with an intended readership: natural scientists and anthropologists interested in a reconciliation between the natural and social sciences. The current title can be seen as a positivistically put question indicating the possibility of giving an unequivocal answer. If, primarily, the intended readership of the book had been emerging anthropologists the title may have been put differently i.e., 'The Craft of Anthropology – Exploring the lives we could have led' accentuating a contextualized perspective on anthropological knowledge production.

The book consists of two parts. The first part, 'Entrances,' consists of four chapters where the reader approaches anthropology as a subject and finds out how anthropology has turned the exotic into the familiar and the familiar into the exotic historically. After each chapter a couple of books are presented for further reading and the reader interested in the full table of references can see that most of the cited works were published several decades earlier. At first sight it appears that the table of references provides an answer to the question 'What was anthropology?'. Though, on the basis of the table of references Eriksen shows that anthropology has experienced continuous change and development of theories and methods and that the older, often groundbreaking, studies can be seen as relevant even today in current debates.

In the second chapter the reader is introduced to some of the key concepts of anthropology opening up for an understanding of social life in terms of personhood, society, culture,

translations of phenomena, comparisons and the importance of contextualization. Eriksen states that anthropologists are aware that there are multiple ways of seeing and that perceptions are shaped by the individual's background, tacit knowledge and interests (31). The anthropological text can be seen as a dialogue between the author and the intended readership (32). The third chapter maps the terrain of the anthropological production of knowledge, i.e., based on fieldwork and analysis. As Eriksen points out (43), research is about exploring the unknown, not about confirming your own ideas. That point has come to the fore since the 1970s when the formerly colonized subjects started writing back and questioning cultural representations (Ashcroft et al 2002). In the fourth chapter, closing the first part of the book, Eriksen sheds light on the treasure chest of historical anthropological theories. The reader receives a guided tour through the rich theoretical development from structural-functionalism to postmodernism. Summing up, as a result of the twists and turns of theoretical perspectives over the years, current anthropological research recognizes that the world, cultures and societies can be seen as complex.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters exploring a variation of topics such as reciprocity, kinship, the relation between the natural and social sciences, systems of thoughts and social identity. The fifth chapter starts with a discussion about gift exchange which has had a central place in anthropological research at least since the publication of Mauss' *The Gift* (1925). According to Eriksen (86), Mauss shows that reciprocity can be considered far more important in modern complex societies than many seem to be aware of. An objection can be raised in relation to this formulation which maintains the distinction between traditional and modern societies. That distinction can be considered problematic as it creates asymmetric relations between so called traditional/underdeveloped/primitive societies and modern/advanced/complex societies. It raises the question whether 'we' have ever been modern (Latour 1993). Rounding off the chapter with a reflection Eriksen strives to reconcile natural scientists and social scientists, who despite the fact that we approach phenomena from different perspectives, both have reached the conclusion that reciprocity constitutes a fundamental aspect of human life.

In the sixth chapter Eriksen shows that kinship studies have been a core focus within anthropology, how the field was weakened and that kinship studies could rise to prominence again. This chapter also includes a discussion on adoption practices in relation to kinship systems that emphasize a few complicated aspects of transnational adoption. As Eriksen notes (111), 'kinning' or creating kinship, does not come without effort. The seventh chapter discusses the strained relation between the natural and social sciences which could be found in the view on the constitution of Knowledge. While biologists look for unequivocal and universal laws in the context of knowledge most anthropologists accept the fact that the world contains contradiction and complexity (117). In sum, Eriksen finds reconciliation of differences in the acceptance of the value of both approaches (135).

The eighth chapter gives an account of how human thoughts can be explored with the available anthropological field methods such as participant observation, interviews and a basic curiosity for other individual's way of life (136). Eriksen sheds light on Lévi-Strauss' book *The Savage Mind* (1966) in which Lévi-Strauss develops a theory of totemism. This enigmatic phenomenon has been the subject of much anthropological theory and speculation over the years. Totems can be seen as a system of thoughts. As Eriksen notes (145), this mode of thought contributes to making sense of the world through its power to classify and connect discrete phenomena. In other words, explorations of how individuals make sense of the world

can show how particular ways of life differing from others may be equally meaningful and valuable, that everything could have been different and that another world is possible. The ninth chapter, concluding the book, gives an account of the field concerning social identity which has been at the forefront of much anthropological research for decades.

Anthropological perspectives have exerted considerable influence on other disciplines and many anthropologists have taken on the task of exploring the emergence of new identities resulting from globalization (152). In conclusion, I have argued that Eriksen's book may be read as an introduction to anthropology with an intended readership composed of natural scientists and anthropologists who would like to see a reconciliation between the natural and social sciences. It remains to be seen if such a reconciliation can be realized. Alternatively, readers may find an interest in transcending the boundary between identifications like natural scientist and social scientist, positioning themselves, in a nutshell, as knowledge producers.

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