An overheated world

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO OVERHEATING BY THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN.
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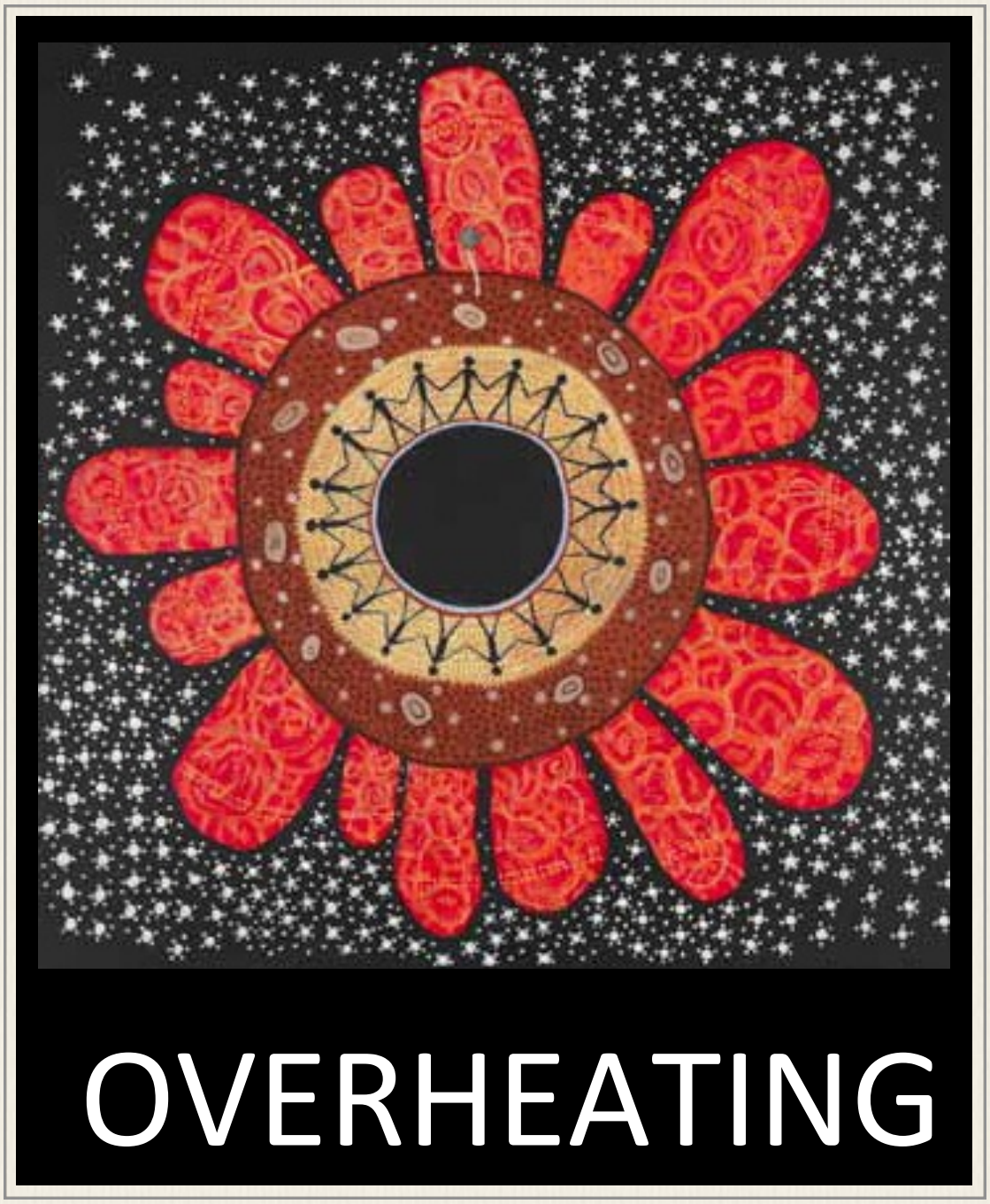

THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN

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The accelerated and intensified contact which is a defining characteristic of globalisation leads to tensions, contradictions, conflict and changed opportunities in ways that affect identity, the environment and the economy. In all three cases, change takes place unevenly, but often fast and as a result of a peculiar combination of local and transnational processes. Such forms of change lead to 'overheating effects' in local settings worldwide: Unevenly paced change where exogenous and endogenous factors combine lead to instability, uncertainty and unintended consequences in a broad range of institutions and practices, and contribute to a widely shared feeling of powerlessness and alienation,. People perceive, understand and act upon the changes in widely differing ways depending on their position in the locality (class, age, gender etc.) and on the characteristics of the locality as well as its position within regional, national and transnational systems. In order to understand globalisation, it is necessary to explore how its crises are being dealt with in local contexts – how people resist imposed changes, negotiate their relationship to global and transnational forces, and which strategies for survival, autonomy and resistance are being developed. These explorations must take the genius loci of the locality seriously, situate the locality historically and connect it to an analysis of global processes. Finally, in order to demonstrate the ubiquity of overheating effects, systematic comparison between otherwise very different localities is necessary.

Locally, the crises are best understood as crises of reproduction: People across the world find it difficult to sustain themselves economically the way they used to; their right to define who they are is under pressure, resulting in a crisis of identity; and the physical environment changes in ways which indicate that human activity at the outset of the 21t century is ultimately unsustainable.

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Never before has humanity placed its stamp on the planet in ways even remotely comparable to the situation today. Human domination of Earth is such that some have suggested to name the current geological era the Anthropocene, a nomenclature which would, if widely adopted, make the Holocene (which began just after

the last Ice Age, 11,500 years ago) a very brief interlude in the history of the planet. Be this as it may, we live in an era which, since the onset of the industrial revolution in Europe, is marked by human activity and expansion in unprecedented ways.

The growing human population of 7 billion (compared to 1 billion in 1800 and 2 billion as late as 1920) travels, produces, consumes, innovates, communicates, fights and reproduces in a multitude of ways, and we are increasingly aware of each other as we do so. The steady acceleration of communication and transportation of the last two centuries has facilitated contact and made isolation difficult, and is weaving the growing global population ever closer together, without erasing cultural differences, local identities and power disparities. Indeed, as decades of research on collective identification has shown, intensified identity management and the assertion of group boundaries is a likely outcome of increased contact and the perceived threat to group integrity. The standardisation of identity witnessed in e.g. nationalism and religious revivalism is a feature of modernity, not of tradition, although it is frequently dressed in traditional garb.

Only in the last couple of decades has the term ‘globalisation’ entered into common usage, and it may be argued that capitalism, globally hegemonic since the nineteenth century, is now becoming universal in the sense that scarcely any human group now lives independently of a monetized economy. Traditional forms of land tenure are being replaced by private ownership, subsistence agriculture is being phased out in favour of wagework, TV replaces orally transmitted tales, and since 2007, it is estimated that more than half the world's population lives in urban areas. The state, likewise, enters into people's lives almost everywhere, though to different degrees and in different ways.

It is an interconnected world, but not a smoothly and seamlessly integrated one. Rights, duties, opportunities and constraints continue to be unevenly distributed, and the world system itself is fundamentally volatile and contradiction-ridden. The most fundamental contradiction, perhaps, consists in the chronic tension between the universalising forces of global modernity and the autonomy of the local community or society. The drive to standardisation, simplification and universalisation is always countered by a defence of local values, practices and relations. In other words, globalisation does not lead to global homogeneity, but highlights a

tension, typical of modernity, between the system world and the life world, between the standardised and the unique.

At a higher level of abstraction, the tension between economic development and human sustainability is also a chronic one, and it constitutes the most fundamental double-bind of early-21st century capitalism. Almost everywhere, there are trade-offs between economic growth and ecology. There is a broad global consensus among policy-makers and researchers that the global climate is changing irreversibly due to human activity (mostly the use of fossil fuels). However, other environmental problems are also extremely serious, ranging from air pollution in cities in the Global South to the depletion of phosphorus (a key ingredient in chemical fertilizer), overfishing and erosion. Yet the same policy-makers who express concern about environmental problems also advocate continued economic growth, thereby contradicting another fundamental value and contributing to undermining the conditions for their own continued existence.

This globally interconnected world may be described through its tendency to generate chronic crises, being complex in such a way as to be ungovernable, volatile and replete with unintended consequences – there are double binds, there is an uneven pace of change, and an unstable relationship between universalising and localising processes. Major crises engendered by globalisation are those of the environment, of the economy, and of identity. They are interconnected and relatively autonomous, although the fundamental contradiction in the global system arguably is the conflict between growth and sustainability; the three crises share key features, and they are perceived, understood and responded to locally across the world.

'Overheating' is about these three crises. It represents a critical perspective on the contemporary world since it insists on the primacy of the local and studies global processes as inherently contradictory. It also aims to develop an interdisciplinary history of the early 21st century with a basis in ethnography. This is the story of neoliberal global capitalism, the global information society, the post-cold war world: The rise of information technologies enabling fast, cheap and ubiquitous global communication in real time, the demise of 'the Second World' of state socialism, the hegemony of neoliberal economics, the rise of China as an economic world power, the heightened political tension around religion (especially Islam),

the growth of concern for the planet's ecological future in the political mainstream, and the development of a sprawling, but vocal 'alterglobalisation movement' growing out of discontent with the neoliberal world order – all these recent and current developments indicate that this is indeed a new world, markedly different from that 20th century which may have begun with the First World War and the Russian Revolution, and ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Unlike what some said as the Berlin wall went down, history did not end. Quite on the contrary, it accelerated.

Characteristic of the neoliberal world order is the global reach of communication, but also the lack of a single, powerful, ideological alternative. The development paradigm has exhausted itself. State socialism has gone out of fashion almost everywhere. Disillusion with large-scale schemes to improve the lot of humanity is chronic. However, as the Overheating approach would predict, alternatives do exist, even if they are often unarticulated or only partly articulated, but they are local and diverse. The very diversity of the groups engaged in alterglobalisation indicates that the complaints are universal and global, while the solutions are particular and local. Our research, aiming beyond mere scholarly impact, will actively intervene and contribute to the global conversation about social justice, well-being and sustainable futures.

Many entertaining and enlightening books have been written on globalisation since around 1990. Some of them highlight contradictions and tensions within the global system that are reminiscent of the dialectics of globalisation as described here – George Ritzer speaks of 'the grobalization of nothing' and 'the glocalization of something', Manuel Castells about 'system world' and 'life world' (in a manner akin to Luhmann), Keith Hart contrasts a human economy with a neoliberal economy, and Benjamin Barber makes a similar contrast with his concepts of 'Jihad' and 'McWorld' (although the concept 'Jihad' is misguided; global Islam represents a McDonaldised version of that religion). In all cases, the local strikes back at the homogenising and standardising tendencies of the global. Moreover, a plethora of books and other publications on each of the three major crises exists. However, there has until now been no sustained attempt to view them as a whole, empirically interrelated and structurally similar. In aiming to develop an under-

standing of global crises that demonstrates the contradiction between the standardising forces of global modernity and the socially embedded nature of local practices, using the ethnographic and comparative methods of anthropology along with historical and macrosociological material, Overheating will produce a powerful, new perspective on globalisation.

The extant literature on globalisation, in other words, is huge, but it has clear limitations. Notably, most academic studies and journalistic accounts of global phenomena tend to iron out the unique and particular of each locality, either by treating the whole world as if it is about to become one huge working-place or shopping mall, and/or by treating local particularities in a cavalier and superficial way. The anthropological studies that exist of globalisation, on the other hand, tend to limit themselves to one or a few aspects of globalisation, and to focus too exclusively on exactly that local reality which the more wide-ranging studies neglect. These limitations must be transcended dialectically, by building the confrontation between the universal and the particular into the research design as a premise: For a perspective on the contemporary world to be convincing and comprehensive, it needs the view from the helicopter circling the world just as much as it needs the details that can only be discovered with a magnifying glass. The macro and the micro, the universal and the particular must be seen as two sides of the same coin.

In order to explore the local perceptions and responses to globalisation, no method of inquiry is superior to ethnographic field research. Unique among the social science methods, ethnography provides the minute detail and interpretive richness necessary for a full appreciation of local life. This entails a full understanding of local interpretations of global crisis and their consequences at the level of action. Moreover, there is no such thing as the local view. Within any community, views vary since people are differently positioned. Some gain and some lose in a situation of change; some see loss while others see opportunity. But none can anticipate the long-term implications of changes.

While ethnography is the richest and most naturalistic of all the social science methods, it is not sufficient when the task at hand amounts to a study of global interconnectedness and, ultimately, the global system. The methods of ethnography must therefore be supplemented. Ethnography can be said to be enormously deep and broad in its command of human life-worlds, but it can equally well be said

that it lacks both depth and breadth, that is historical depth and societal breadth. A proper grasp of the global crises, in other words, requires both a proper command of an ethnographic field and sufficient contextual knowledge – statistical, historical, macrosociological – to allow that ethnography to enter into the broad conversation about humanity at the outset of the twenty-first century. Since humans always lead local lives, no account of globalisation is complete unless it is anchored in a local life-world – but nor is it complete, since the local reality in itself says little about the system of which it is a part.

Overheating consists of a number of ethnographic projects – currently five, and growing – which aim to produce comparable and compatible data on the local perception, impact and management of the global crises. In this way, both the myopic bias of anthropology and the top-down approach of other social science is transcended. The individual Overheating projects are scattered across the planet, but they speak to larger issues of global importance as well as maintaining an ongoing conversation with each other, through commitment to a number of shared presuppositions, research questions and concepts.

The three crises are conceptualised as crises of reproduction in a context of local overheating effects, that is accelerated, imposed change in one or several crucial life-world realms. The assumption is that the three global – recurrent or chronic – crises of the economy, the environment and cultural identity are being experienced, and dealt with, almost everywhere in the world. Since social reality is created through the interaction of individuals, networks and communities with their wider environments, the crises as such are bound to differ from place to place. Mining takes place in both Queensland and in upland Sierra Leone, but it is not the same thing in these two locations. Glaciers melt in the Andes and in Greenland, but local responses are strikingly different. Financial bubbles burst and lead to unemployment in South Korea as well as in Greece, but local understandings and reactions differ. In many Muslim countries, it is a common assumption that the recurrent global financial crises are more or less deliberately created by the Americans and Israelis to strengthen their grip on the world economy, and YouTube videos allegedly demonstrating this can easily be found.

Faced with the perceptible and sometimes dramatic impact of local events which have their origin in distant lands or at a staggering level of abstraction, peo-

ple everywhere experience problems of reproduction: economically, culturally and environmentally, they see their viability as who they are as being threatened. They are confronted with their own vulnerability, begin to doubt who – or what – they can trust (a crucial distinction, by the way) and develop a heightened awareness of risk. Whether they adapt and adjust, protest or delink is an empirical question; and the crises of globalisation can only be studied with local processes as a point of departure.

Since it must be assumed that different groups in any locality react in their own ways to change, several groups will be given a fair hearing in the Overheating research – the poor, the affluent, the activists and the decision-makers. Each add to the richness of the ethnography and the complexity of the analysis, enabling us to produce a realistic picture of what is at stake for whom, where the tensions and conflicts take place, and how a course of action develops.

An important conceptual distinction is that sometimes described in terms of the formal and the informal, or the system-world and the life-world, the universal and the particular, or just the abstract and the tangible. (Structure and process, langue and parole are related dichotomies.) Since globalisation entails standardisation and homogenisation (which does not have to mean 'Westernisation', cf. Japanese dominance in East Asia, the popularity of Hindi films etc.) – just as capitalism entails the integration of a variety of economic activities within a uniform system where everything is comparable with everything, or ethnicity amounts to making cultural differences comparable by developing a shared language for talking about difference – reactions stressing the virtues of autonomy, tradition, self-sufficiency or independence are inevitable. The right to define oneself, one's past, present and future, one's livelihood and relationship to other people and to nature, becomes a scarce resource and a series of political issues in an era of overheated globalisation. Although change may be welcomed, only the changes that do not challenge or upset established notions of personhood, sociality and continuity, are welcomed. We therefore ask when change is perceived as good, and under what circumstances it is seen as bad, and a string of related questions. The equilibrium between 'roots and boots', change and continuity, is always sought in locally specific ways. In a fundamental sense, the dialectics of globalisation concern the tension, not between 'the global and the local', but between the abstract and formal, and

the tangible and informal, the universal and the specific, the disembedded and the embedded.

Thinking about reproduction in terms of sustainability, we also intend to distinguish between renewable and non-renewable resources in all three realms. That which is renewable can be sold and bought, negotiated and relinquished for a while, since it can be recovered. That which is non-renewable must therefore be guarded, nursed and protected. Throughout human history, until very recently, nature has been perceived as unproblematically renewable. It 'strikes back' at culture, which has to protect itself from the forces of nature. Only in the last few decades has nature increasingly been seen as weak and vulnerable in the face of aggressive and expansive cultural projects, and thus needs the protection of culture. Fossil fuels, moreover, are non-renewable, but so is phosphorus (a key ingredient in chemical fertilizer). Perhaps, as some anthropologists have suggested, identity is that which cannot be sold and bought; a non-renewable resource, an inalienable possession, that without which your past, present and future lose their significance. Anna Tsing has described this dimension of local life as 'nonscalable'; it cannot be mass-produced, and if it is universalised, it may either end up being simplified beyond recognition or – more interestingly – function as a Trojan horse thwarting the universalising logic from the inside. Many religious believers argue that simplification is what happened with Islam when the Saudi version of that religion is exported across the Muslim world; its local embeddedness is eradicated, and the religion becomes a set of imposed rules and principles.

A related family of concepts are those dealing with human vulnerability, risk and resilience. Large-scale processes influencing local conditions create vulnerability both at the objective and the subjective level. The feeling of powerlessness when confronted with, say, the Euro crisis or the rise in world temperatures, is both widespread and easy to understand. People react differently to the local effects of global crises. Some seek local solutions in political or religious realms, while others see their efforts in a broader context, often seeking transnational alliances. To some, there isn't even a crisis, only a set of new opportunities.

Global crises are rarely perceived locally as global crises. Their local repercussions or more immediate effects are perceived, rather, as crises of reproduction

and a threat to or loss of autonomy. A key research question, with implications for a political analysis, concerns who (or what) is blamed for the crisis.

The Overheating projects will provide accounts of the global crises that simultaneously show their locally unique character and their universal dimensions. But they also aim to develop a genealogy of the present by adding historical depth to the ethnographically based studies. Just as historical anthropology has provided credible accounts of colonialism, Overheating will show how neoliberalism and information age global capitalism have affected communities everywhere and are, at the same time, both universal and global, and locally particular. People will always understand themselves in terms of their enduring social relations, their webs of reciprocity and moral obligation, their shared intimacies and structures of interpersonal trust. This is why disembedding processes, whether driven by states, markets, corporations or NGOs, are bound to be partial, and will be met with resistance when imposing changes that threaten people's autonomy and integrity.

Overheating, furthermore, is committed research. It is fundamental, basic research into the human condition at the outset of the third millennium, but it is also designed as a contribution to the improvement of the human condition. Some of the publications and activities within the project will openly advocate change, whether concerning land rights, water management or workers' rights.

In spite of its superior research methods and sophisticated tools of analysis, anthropology struggles to come properly to terms with the world today: Their lack of historical depth and societal breadth has been mentioned, and a third problem concerns normativity and relativism. For generations, anthropologists were as a rule content describing, comparing and analysing without passing moral judgement. The people they studied were far away and represented separate moral communities. Indeed, the method of cultural relativism requires a suspension of judgement to be effective. However, as the world began to shrink as a result of accelerated change in the postwar decades, it increasingly became epistemologically and morally difficult to place ‘the others’ on a different moral scale than oneself. The de facto cultural differences also shrank as peoples across the world increasingly began to partake in a bumpy, but seamless global conversation. By the turn of the millennium, tribal peoples were rapidly becoming a relic, although a dwindling

number of tribal groups continue to resist modernity, notably capitalism and the state. The last Australian aborigines to have lived in a traditional way were brought 'to civilization' during a drought in Western Australia in 1977. Indigenous groups became accustomed to money, traditional peasants' children began to go to school, Indian villagers learnt about their human rights, and Chinese villagers were transformed into urban industrial workers. In such a world, pretending that what anthropologists did was simply to study remote cultures, would have been disingenious and intellectually misleading.

The introduction of the term globalisation coincided with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the beginning of the end of apartheid, the coming of the internet and the first truly mobile telephones. This world of 1991, which influences and is being influenced by different people (and peoples) differently and asymmetrically, rapidly began to create a semblance of a global moral community where there had formerly been none, at least from the viewpoint of anthropology. Ethnographers travelling far and wide now encountered Amazonian indians keen to find out how they could promote their indigenous rights in international fora, Australian aborigines poring over old anthropological books in order to relearn their forgotten traditions, Indian women struggling to escape from caste and patriarchy, urban Africans speaking cynically about corrupt politicians and Pacific islanders trying to establish intellectual copyright over their cultural production in order to prevent piracy.

In such a world, the lofty gaze of the anthropological aristocrat searching for interesting dimensions of comparison comes across not only as dated, but as somewhat tasteless. Professed neutrality becomes in itself a political statement.

What had happened – apart from the fact that native Melanesians now had money, native Africans mobile phones and native Amazonians rights claims? The significant change was that the world had, almost in its entirety, been transformed, while the anthropologists were looking the other way, into a single – if bumpy, diverse and patchy – moral space.

In this increasingly interconnected world, cultural relativism can no longer be an excuse for not engaging with the victims of patriarchal violence in India, human rights lawyers in African prisons, minorities demanding not just cultural survival but fair representation in the parliament. Were one to refer to 'African values'

in an assessment of a particular practice, the only possible follow-up question would be 'whose African values'? In this world, there is friction between systems of value and morality. There can be no retreat into the rarefied world of radical cultural difference when, all of a sudden, some of the 'radically culturally different' ask how they can obtain wagework, so that they can begin to buy things. The suture between the old and the new can be studied by anthropologists, but it must be negotiated by those caught on the frontier, and in this world, the anthropologist, the 'peddler of the exotic' in Clifford Geertz' words, cannot withdraw or claim professional immunity, since the world of the remote native is now his own.

The world has become one place, and it is a big one, but it can only be seen from a local vantage-point. Localities continue to differ, but the moral and political responsibilities of scholars studying in these places are by now glaringly obvious. In the Overheating project, we work with local people and develop our analyses in collaboration with them, and will contribute actively to building knowledge locally, by making people aware of comparable situations elsewhere and sharing our analyses of the global system. We are committed to producing knowledge that can be used locally, trans-locally and indeed globally in the quest for a more equitable, sustainable future on the planet.