

Overheating and cooling down: Responses to a world out of control



On 22 March, Global Governance students had the wonderful opportunity to host a prestigious guest speaker, Prof. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, renowned social anthropologist, a professor at the University of Oslo, published author, and former president of the European Association of Social Anthropologists.

The title of the conversation was “Overheating and cooling down: Responses to a world out of control”, to highlight the concept of “Overheating” in anthropology, introduced by prof. Eriksen in several of his works, “Overheating: An anthropology of Accelerated Change” or “An overheated world: An anthropological history of the early 21st Century”.

Traditional societies in the first half of the 20th century had a negative notion of change, strived to reproduce traditions to keep things constant. This changed with modernity, where change was perceived as positive, synonymous with progress and development, parallel with Francis Bacon’s philosophy. Today, we live in an era of acceleration. This is easily illustrated through several examples in the history of humankind. A first example is that of the population: it took a hundred thousand years to reach the first billion of individuals in the 19th century. Just a hundred years later it increased to 2 billion and then went up to seven and a half billion in the subsequent century. A second example is that of energy consumption, with the invention of the steam engine 200 years ago a fossil fuel revolution was triggered. The energy consumption increased 30 fold since then. A third example is that of connectivity, over the last 10 years the number of internet users increased from 1 billion to an amount of 3 billion. Internet becomes widespread, not confined to a few places anymore. The world is more connected, and communication has become more deterritorialized and instantaneous. All these changes have accelerated the last few decades, leading to an overheated state of the earth, but without a thermostat to control it.

There are many possible entry points in the study of this acceleration, many of which Mr. Eriksen illustrated through examples. One is that of massive urban growth in the global south, where continuous urban stretches developed, especially in former European colonies in Africa. Another through the historical events in 1991, such as the breakup of Yugoslavia, end of the cold war, deregulation of the Indian economy that led to a global single marketplace, sans few exceptions. An interesting perspective he gave is through observation of container ships, which though often underestimated, encapsulate many aspects of globalization. Today all goods transportations, ships, trains, and trucks, have the same dimension, tailor-made and adjusted to fit containers. This homogeneity across countries allowed global trade to be reduced it by more than 90% since the 1960s. Such changes might seem not seem trivial when we look at the bigger picture but reflect how the world has changed throughout years and how accelerated this change was.

Professor Eriksen stressed that anthropology alone is not adequate to understand it and that this phenomenon has important political implications, which makes it relevant for Global Governance. We can draw analogies with physics too, where heat and speed are two sides of the same coin, and increasing speed generates friction. This friction refers to the ethnicity politics that the populist or nationalist parties resort to, in the name of representing the people. He argued that today, no politician talks about hope, but sells fear to gain votes. There is frantic relentless change with lack of a shared vision, like a car speeding on a highway with no speed limit and no control. Hence, we notice a polarization of the society from this overheating, which becomes crucial in understanding identity politics.

Today, we live in communities that are both universal and unique. We are all connected in ways we have never been before, which is relevant in terms of globalization because we have the possibility to have a global conversation as we worry about the same things, but also unique because every place has something unique that can only be scaled up in that location. We are aware of these changes in our surroundings, but these changes have not been analyzed in terms of how they affect our way of thinking. He went on to discuss how people in local communities respond to this overheating phenomenon and the common patterns to be found. This alienation makes them feel powerless, sans explanation, and urge them to take actions without any understanding of its direction. This anger among the people of the growing inequality and distance between power leads to the ideological turmoil we witness today with much unpredictability, and a crisis of legitimacy, responsive to overheating. The complaints of people are rationalized, but they are often sent to the wrong address.

In order to resolve this issue, he outlined that we need to keep the global conversation going, yet much of what we do needs to be scaled down, in terms of our politics, economy and even identity. Scaling down is one way to evade the powerlessness, by slowing down, in dominant parts of the world and cooling down the effects of overheating to avoid breaking down. We have a substantial need for legitimacy and identification in politics with trust and care towards the population. He suggested to start with what is close and then began to scale up, as per the principle of subsidiarity.

The conversation concluded with an important statement: We are seven and half billion today trying to live together on this planet. We must briefly cool down, scale down and slow down for the world to be less affluent, less prolific, less consumerist but also more diverse, more decentralized. Happiness must be more important than consumption and responsibility must mean more than hedonism. However, in doing so, we must remember to safeguard the most important achievement in the history of humanity - the ability to identify with people far away and to see the whole of humanity as one big family.

We would like to thank Professor Eriksen for his wonderful yet provoking conversation, and as Global Governance students, we hope we can take a stand on this critical issue in the future.

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