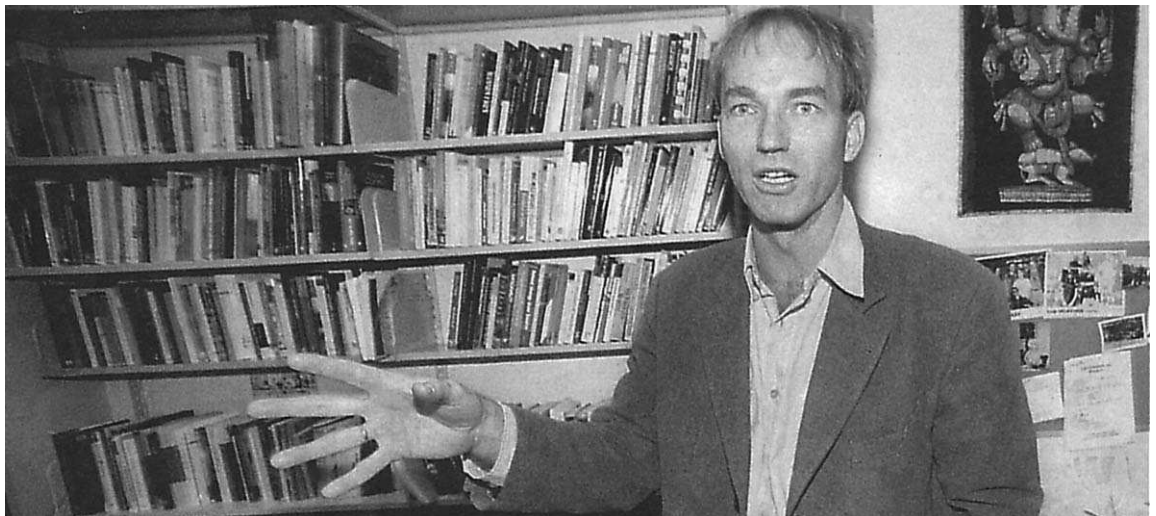


The young rebel and the dusty professor

A tale of anthropologists and the media in Norway

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PROFESSOR: Thomas Hylland Eriksen og andre intellektuelle liker åpenbart ikke at debatten om det flerkulturelle samfunn har kommet ut av de lukkede miljøene, skriver Shabana Rehman. Foto: LARS EIVIND BONES

Fig. 1. The photo of Thomas Hylland Eriksen which accompanied Shabana Rehman's critique of ivory tower academics. The headline reads: 'The geniuses and the idiots'.

Geniene og idiotene

Social anthropologists do not have a strong tradition of contributing to the mainstream media. Unlike historians, we rarely write books intended for general audiences, and in most European countries the subject is considered an arcane and specialized one with little relevance for the contemporary world. This state of affairs must be seen as an opportunity missed. I can think of no other academic discipline with a similar potential for making sense of the present age and its challenges of cultural translation, colliding ways of life and world views, conflicting images and identity politics, symbolic hegemonies and silencing. Yet very few anthropologists in the symbolically dominant, that is English-speaking, parts of the world regularly engage with a wider intellectual public sphere.

It is therefore a matter of some interest that anthropologists have a surprisingly strong media presence in Norway, where they regularly comment on current events, write op-ed articles, discuss minority issues on television, write polemical books and popular science for general audiences, and so on. The dilemmas and trade-offs involved are evident: the complexity of the anthropologist's work tends to disappear when it is channelled through the high-speed debates of the mass media, and only his or her opinions are presented. The anthropologist's views appear in a context defined by considerations other than those motivating his or her intervention, and the outcome is often frustrating to the academic, who may feel betrayed and misunderstood. On the other hand, a number of anthropologists have become highly skilled at using the media to influence public opinion, some of them functioning as public intellectuals with clear normative agendas and the ability to explain them. It would therefore be misleading to see the relationship between media and academics purely as a form of one-way exploitation.

In Norway social anthropology has arguably become the most visible academic profession in the mainstream mass media during the last decade or so. Anthropologists are no longer primarily associated with remote places, but regularly comment on issues such as consumption and food, migration and cultural identity, Third World issues, nation-

alism and sport, Norwegianness and cultural creolization, and a number of other topics. Indeed, we have become so visible in Norwegian public life that our opinions are occasionally actively solicited when we remain silent on some particular issue. This kind of request can even sometimes be heard as an accusation that we are deliberately trying to cover up some uncomfortable fact, typically expressed in the form: 'Where were the anthropologists when x, y and z happened? Why did no anthropologist speak up in defence of A, B and C?'

The story I am about to tell is set against the backdrop of the ongoing debate on immigration, the second generation, enforced marriages, culture and rights. As in other Western European countries, such issues have been at the forefront of Norwegian public debate for years, and social research dealing with minority issues, largely from the perspective of the state and its interest in 'integration', has been a major academic growth industry since the 1980s.

In the summer of 2002, a controversy erupted in the mainstream Norwegian media which not only involved social anthropologists, but also offers an opportunity for a critical interrogation of the role of academics in public arenas. Like most public controversies of its kind, it introduced few new arguments or facts about society; it consisted largely of a vigorous exchange of insults and arguments about proper form and symbolic power, juxtaposing – in the words of one commentator – 'the dusty professors' with 'the young female rebel'.

Ivory towers versus populism

It was late July, and we were on holiday in the Lofoten archipelago. The Sunday weather was horrible, with pouring rain and strong winds. Our whale-watching trip had been cancelled, we were now waiting for a ferry, and we bought a newspaper to pass the time. Opening the paper to page four, my wife discovered that half of it was taken up by a photo of her husband posed in front of an imposing bookshelf and a colourful image of a Hindu deity, gesturing and apparently saying something to the photographer. Glancing over her shoulder, I immediately realized that the accompanying article, entitled 'The geniuses and the idiots',¹ did not bring good news. Not to me anyway.

The rain continued to pour, the ferry was late, the kids

Fig. 2. A full-page photo of Shabana Rehman, accompanying her response to Gullestad in *Dagbladet*, 2 August 2002. Although the intention may have been ironic, it clearly plays on her Oriental mystique and lends support to her assumed role as spokesperson for first- and second-generation immigrants from Muslim societies.

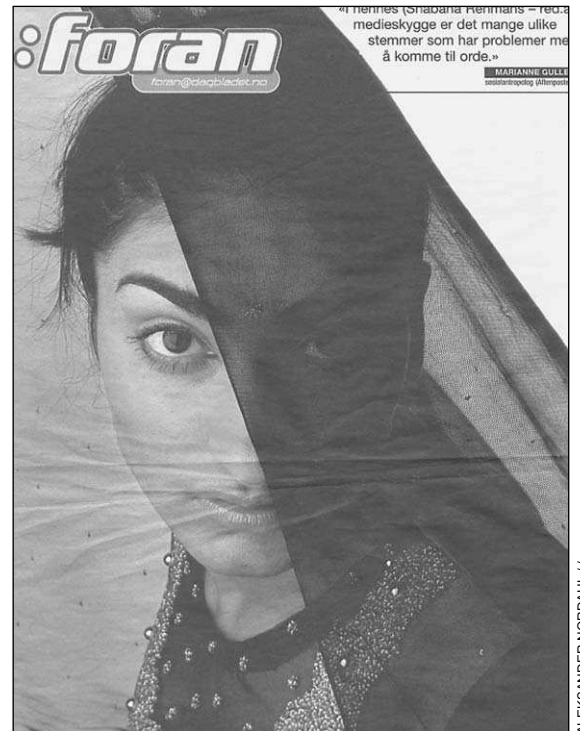
were listening to their music in the back seat, and I read the article, written by a regular columnist in Norway's main liberal newspaper, *Dagbladet*. The author, a young activist and standup comedian named Shabana Rehman, was lashing out at 'intellectuals' – using me as her main target – for being patronizing, arrogant and politically irrelevant. Over the past couple of years Rehman had achieved nationwide fame for her witty and provocative approach to issues related to cultural traditions and immigration. She had campaigned against religious conservatism and enforced marriages by both conventional and unorthodox means, but her breakthrough as a national figure had come with a feature article in *Dagbladet's* Saturday magazine, for which she was photographed naked with a Norwegian flag painted on her body.

The background to Rehman's unexpectedly vitriolic attack on 'left-leaning intellectuals' was a piece I had published a week or so earlier in a much smaller newspaper, the highbrow weekly *Morgenbladet*.² This article itself was a response to one published in *Morgenbladet* a week earlier which had attacked academics and what it called leftist intellectuals for sheep-like dedication to 'political correctness' and naïve anti-racism in their approach to both immigrant and minority issues and the aftermath of 11 September.³ As one of the intellectuals implicitly attacked (and perhaps not so implicitly – the writer may have had me in mind when he spoke about 'pop anthropologists'), I responded by arguing that virtually everything he said was wrong. As a matter of fact, I claimed, research and public debate on migration and ethnic relations had for years been characterized by a plurality of views and approaches; moreover, hardly anybody commenting on 11 September believed, as this writer insinuated, that Osama bin Laden was a spokesman for the impoverished and oppressed of the world.

In my article I also pointed out that these views about the conformist political correctness in academia had mysteriously become commonplace, a myth had gained acceptance during the last year or so; I suggested that before Shabana Rehman entered the fray with her liberal individualist views on matters such as sex and religion, the debate about multiethnic society had been dominated by conservative cultural essentialist views. My response was not intended to belittle her role in Norwegian society – her views, so different from the dominant views within minority communities and so compatible with the *Zeitgeist*, have had a powerful impact on the majority's discourse about minorities. It was intended only as an attempt to correct errors, but it was perceived as something else: Rehman's attack on me, and by extension on all academics, accused us of despising people who had read fewer books than us, of being voluntarily imprisoned in our ivory tower, and finally of having conformist views and no influence in greater society.

That evening I received a text message from a couple of friends advising me not to respond. Since Rehman's accusations were obviously absurd, they said, I would be wise to remain silent.

This was not to be. Returning to Oslo a few days later, I sent a short comment to the newspaper, rectifying some of the misleading statements in the Sunday article. However, by the time this piece was printed, the debate had taken a new direction. On Thursday 1 August the social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, herself a well-known public figure in Norway, published a long response to Rehman in the Oslo broadsheet *Aftenposten*,⁴ in which she questioned Rehman's role in Norwegian public life, claiming that her media presence 'overshadowed others'. More substantially, she argued that Rehman's emphasis, in her regular column, on issues such as sexuality and lifestyle had contributed to shifting public attention away from ethnic dis-



ALEKSANDER NORDAHL / 7

crimination to less important matters. She also intimated that Rehman's views could easily be appropriated by politicians and others who demanded cultural assimilation from immigrants. Perhaps most importantly, she argued that Rehman's position as a liberal and 'liberated' young woman of the second generation confirmed Norwegian stereotypes rather than questioning them; finally she lamented Rehman's explicit anti-intellectualism – in her original Sunday article, Rehman had said that intellectuals were only interested in recognition from other intellectuals, not in influencing or changing society.

In the following days, both *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet* published a very large number of comments by and interviews with academics, activists and prominent immigrants, who represented a variety of views on the controversy. Some said that Rehman's offensive language (among other things, she has described culturally loyal Muslim women as 'a herd of cows') had led to an unhealthy polarization between 'liberals' and 'conservatives' in immigrant circles, where more soft-spoken and moderate positions had become difficult to sustain; some defended her against the onslaught from the ivory tower; some attacked the media for not giving space to a wider range of perspectives; and some confessed ambivalence. Interestingly, nearly all those who defended Rehman were ethnic Norwegians, while nearly all immigrants whose views appeared confessed sympathy with Gullestad.⁵ Moreover, both newspapers published several new articles by both Gullestad and Rehman, in which they partly repeated their criticisms, partly tried to explain what they had 'really meant', and partly expressed dismay at the rhetorical devices employed by the other.⁶ Many others also commented on the debate, which quickly spilled over from the columns of *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet* to virtually all other media in the country.

Language games and symbolic power

Let me now offer a brief analysis of the controversy, which could shed light on the potentials and limitations of anthropologists as public commentators. It has at least five aspects worth considering in the present context.

Symbolic power relations. Different arenas generate different intellectual and political agendas. The strategy of the columnist-activist is to attract maximum attention within a minimum of time, through a well orchestrated and

Fig. 2. The photo of Shabana Rehman that accompanies her regular column in *Dagbladet*.



Thanks to the AT editorial team and two AT referees for help in sharpening the argument.

1. Rehman, Shabana: Geniene og idiotene [The geniuses and the idiots], *Dagbladet*, 28 July 2002.

2. Thomas Hylland Eriksen: Det nye bildet av innvandringen [The new image of immigration], *Morgenbladet*, 19 July 2002.

3. Geir Levi Nilsen: 11. september: Positivt for Vesten [11 September: Good for the West], *Morgenbladet*, 12 July 2002.

4. Marianne Gullestad: Rehman skygger for andre [Rehman overshadows others], *Aftenposten*, 1 August 2002.

5. Reactions from minority writers defending Gullestad's perspective include Hadia Tajik and Mala Naveen: Skyggeboksing [Shadow boxing], *Aftenposten*, 7 August 2002, Athar Akram: Medienes grep om 'de andre stemmene' [The media grip on 'the other voices'], *Aftenposten*, 8 August 2002 and, also by Akram (who is the leader of Norway's Muslim Youth): Assimilering? [Assimilation?], *Dagbladet*, 5 September 2002. Support for Rehman can be found in Bjørn Lindgren: Norsk smålighet [Norwegian pettiness], *Aftenposten*, 7 August 2002; Brit Fougner: Det sunne raseriet [The wholesome rage], *Dagbladet*, 8 August 2002; and Inger-Lise Lien: Shabanas kamp for humanismen [Shabana's humanist struggle], *Dagbladet*, 16 August 2002.

6. Shabana Rehman: Hvem skygger for hvem? [Who overshadows whom?], *Dagbladet*, 2 August 2002; Marianne Gullestad: Maktkamp med forvrengninger [Distorted power struggle], *Aftenposten*, 3 August 2002; Shabana Rehman: Velkommen til Jante [Welcome to Jante – Jante refers to a well-known fictional village renowned for its petty bourgeois conformism], *Dagbladet*, 5 August 2002; Marianne Gullestad: Tekster skaper virkelighet [Texts create reality], *Aftenposten*, 6 August 2002.

7. Rehman: Hvem skygger for hvem?, op. cit.

8. Rehman: *ibid.*

9. Marianne Gullestad: *Det norske sett med nye øyne* [Norwegianness seen from a new perspective], Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 2002.

pithily phrased intervention. In canvassing for public attention to the issue of enforced marriage, Rehman herself succeeded superbly at this in the winter of 2001/2002. Academics develop and defend their symbolic power in slower and more cumbersome ways, as it takes decades for their capital to accumulate. Their public authority rests not on the felicitous turn of phrase, but on their implied professional expertise. In this debate, the two parties seem to have suspected one another of trying to monopolize symbolic power at the point where their arenas intersect, namely in media-based attempts to influence public opinion and policy. Anthropologists and other academics usually (but not necessarily) lose this kind of competition. By popular definition aloof from the concerns of 'ordinary people', they lack the street-cred of an uneducated but bright and witty activist (or, for that matter, populist politician). The online debates which accompanied the Rehman-Gullestad controversy, at least, consisted largely of massive verbal assaults on academics.

Social responsibility. Both the academic and the non-academic who were prominently featured in this controversy profess humanist, political or moral intentions. Rehman clearly sees herself, and is seen by a large segment of Norwegian society, as a champion of universal human rights; Gullestad, with her cultural-relativist background and contextualist epistemology, is concerned with the respect for and recognition of a multitude of experiences and life-worlds. There are some fundamental differences between their ideas of personhood (Rehman is strongly individualist – some would even say voluntarist – while Gullestad takes a more sociocentric position), but that is not the point here. Their views on social responsibility are similar, but they diverge politically as well as in their respective views on proper form.

Scholarly responsibility. This set of obligations operates on at least two levels: academics are responsible for not misrepresenting their research object in public, and for protecting the integrity of their informants. Both these responsibilities can militate against their presenting their findings in the mass media. Journalists are less constrained. A columnist represents only herself and can tell any story she likes. In 2001 a TV documentary revealed that several Muslim leaders in Norway defended the practice of female circumcision. They were filmed with a hidden camera, interviewed by a young African woman who asked to be taken into their confidence. Such methods could never have been used by social anthropologists, and our ethical guidelines restrict our potential for generating juicy tabloid fodder.

The social construction of academic realities. In one of her many contributions, Shabana Rehman wrote that academics live in a 'goldfish bowl'.⁷ This view was subsequently supported by many of the contributors to online debates, who claimed that academic researchers know little about the real world. Instead of confronting messy realities and dangerous political issues, Rehman and others have alleged, they politely and respectfully exchange views in the closed circles of the academy, risking little in the way of exposure to less polished voices 'from the people' or the merciless machinery of the mass media. Confronted with this kind of criticism, academics are likely to respond that their job is documentation and analysis, and possibly influencing politics by producing policy reports, but that they have no obligation to be visible in the news media. However, given that many academics have chosen to function as public intellectuals, they have agreed to play a game where the rules are decided by others. Since the alternative is a position on the margins of society, the challenge is both real and relevant.

Speed. The debate, which took place largely in two major Norwegian newspapers, was characterized by

extreme speed. By the time I got column space for my response to Rehman's attack, less than a week after it had been published, the focus of the controversy had shifted, and my comments already seemed dated. Few academics would be able and willing to follow the speed of debate, and not feel intimidated by the massive media pressure generated by the controversy.

There is no simple lesson to be learnt about anthropologists as public commentators here. The Rehman-Gullestad shoot-out can be understood as a confrontation between two partly overlapping language games. The language game played by Rehman exhorts the player to be witty, provocative, fast and pointed. Gullestad's game is regulated by rules that require consistency, conscientious presentation of the evidence, clarity in language and loyalty to informants. The media allow both of these (and other) language games to co-exist, but there is little doubt that the former has a more immediate public impact than the latter.

Interestingly, the most common complaint among scholars and researchers who feel misrepresented in the media, namely that their views are simplified and misunderstood, did not apply in this case. Both Gullestad and the other academics who participated in this controversy were given ample space to elaborate their views – the entire affair took place in the first half of August, a time of year when there is a lot of available column space. On the other hand, the contrast between speed and simplicity on the one hand, and slowness and complexity on the other, is evident as a contextual factor, possibly the most important one. In the commentary that sparked the debate (although this was soon forgotten), I had criticized a newspaper article for not offering evidence for its sweeping statements – in other words I had argued for a slower and more cumbersome way of dealing with the world. In one of her responses to Gullestad, Rehman wrote that at a time when the murder of a young Swedish woman of Kurdish origin was all over the news [see article on pp. 6-7 of this issue – *Ed.*],⁸ 'the academics' were busy debating whether or not Norwegians had become more racist over the past decade. Gullestad in turn explained that she had been working on the book in question for four years⁹ – in other words, that it belonged to a slower temporal regime than the news.

The discussion above amounts to a contrasting of academic and non-academic ways of presenting an argument. However, in itself it says little about the unique contribution of social anthropology. Similar exchanges might equally take place between cautious researchers and impatient activists in other areas, for example in relation to environmental issues, GM foods or international politics. So how does anthropology come into it, if at all? If our strength consists in seeing the world from below and from the inside, and in representing (and re-presenting) versions of lived reality which rarely make the headlines, then Marianne Gullestad does exactly this when she reminds Norwegian newspaper readers that there are many other stories, experiences and life-worlds among members of first-, second- and third-generation minorities, in addition to the ones offered by *Dagbladet's* influential columnist. In other words, although it seemed at the time that Gullestad lost the exchange, her attempt to make the world a little bit more complex was, to judge from the content of the debate, an excellent demonstration of the still largely untapped potential of social anthropology in the public arena. On the other hand, the outcome of the debate, which in the eyes of many confirmed their view of academics as an arrogant clique who think they know better than the common masses, indicates that in spite of their considerable media presence in Norway there is little reason to suppose that they are currently able to function as integrated intellectuals making sense of the messy realities of contemporary society. The gap remains to be bridged. ●