

Chapter 10

The Otherness of Norwegian Anthropology

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INTRODUCTION

It is debatable whether Norwegian anthropology merits inclusion in a book about “other” anthropologies. A criterion for “otherness”—the main criterion, one might say—is that the subject has, in the country in question, followed an itinerary separate from the Anglophone and French mainstream, building on theories and intellectual impulses unfamiliar to mainstream anthropology, or facing empirical challenges which give direction and shape to the work of local anthropologists as well as the domestic anthropological discourse, that make it in important ways distinct from dominant trends.

A promising case could be made for the otherness of Norwegian anthropology before the mid to late 1950s, when, under the influence of German *Völkerkunde* as well as the more sprawling varieties of North American four-field anthropology, it purported to be a broad and comprehensive “science of man.” The leading light of Norwegian anthropology at the time, Professor Guttorm Gjessing at the Ethnographic Museum of Oslo, was an engaged intellectual who was an enthusiastic defender of *samnorsk*, a radical hybrid language fusing the two main varieties of Norwegian, *nynorsk* and *riksmål*. He was also a committed environmentalist and a founding member of the Socialist People’s Party, branching off from the left wing of the Labour Party in the early 1960s. Gjessing’s rich and varied writings in anthropology revealed a synthesizing intellectual who saw few limitations to the possibilities of anthropological knowledge. Whether writing about the Sami, ecological

adaptation or comparative politics, Gjessing rarely relinquished an opportunity to draw inferences about implications for politics and critical self-examination. His anthropology was truly a cultural critique, if not quite along the lines envisioned by Marcus and Fischer (1986).

However, the influence of colorful iconoclasts and maverick intellectuals like Gjessing was not destined to last. At the Oslo Ethnographic Museum, advanced students were, by the early 1950s, quickly absorbing the latest British social anthropology, correctly seen as the most dynamic and innovative branch of anthropology at the time. *Primus inter pares* in the museum attic, the young Axel Sommerfelt convinced his fellow students, *pace* Fortes and Gluckman, that anthropology was tantamount to the comparative study of social forms, and in particular, legal and political forms, and that the vastly ambitious anthropology of the likes of Gjessing was far too imprecise and, at the end of the day, amateurish to count as scientific. Soon afterwards, a young and very energetic Fredrik Barth appeared in the museum attic, and the rest is, as they say, history; or more precisely, the rest is the history of Norwegian social anthropology. Effectively erasing the memory of earlier Norwegian anthropologies and refusing them a place in our genealogy, students never even get to hear about these anthropologies. Mary Bouquet (personal communication) recalls sitting in the Ethnographic Museum in the mid 1990s studying the history of Norwegian anthropology (Bouquet 1996), with Professor Axel Sommerfelt separating the pages of a book by Ole Solberg with a pen-knife as he simultaneously translated from it. The book, written by Gjessing's contemporary and predecessor as Professor at the museum—in his day, an important voice against the racist pseudoscience defended by a very different kind of anthropologist, namely the physical—had been sitting on its shelf for half a century without being read once. Such was the extent of willed amnesia when the majority of Norwegian social anthropologists (both of them—the subject was small back then) decided to narrow and sharpen the discipline, dissociate them from the earlier history of Norwegian anthropology, and set up shop as a subsidiary of Oxbridge.

Thus, Norwegian anthropology in the last forty years can, only a tad simplistically, be described as that of a branch of British social anthropology. By and large, Norwegian anthropologists tend to see themselves, and to be seen, as matrilateral relatives of their British colleagues (with Barth playing the part of the mother's brother). The location of the country has nonetheless given it the autonomy of the remote province, and it is possible that theoretical orientations among Norwegian anthropologists are more varied than what is the case in the UK.

Be that as it may, Norwegian anthropologists publish most of their scholarly work in English, do fieldwork all over the world, and take part

in the English language public sphere of academic anthropology. Thus the question raised initially: What is “other” about it?

Norwegian anthropology is unusual in two respects: it has a very large number of practitioners and enormous student numbers; and it is highly visible in the public sphere, domestic anthropologists contributing actively to all the constituent parts of it—cultural journals, newspapers, books and magazines, radio, television, internet, and public meetings. This chapter sets itself the task of outlining the untypical situation of Norwegian anthropology, and trying to account for it.

DEMOGRAPHY AND RECRUITMENT

Like in many other European countries, social anthropology has grown very fast in Norway since the 1960s, with an accelerated growth rate in the 1990s. It is taught at all levels at four universities (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Tromsø), the Oslo and Bergen departments being the largest with a permanent staff of about 15 each, in addition to dozens of Ph.D. students and temporary lecturers. A considerable number of anthropologists, moreover, work at research institutes and colleges around the country; in some places, such as Nordlandsforskning in Bodø and NOVA in Oslo, the number of anthropologists exceeds half a dozen.

The number of people qualified as anthropologists in Norway is very high in proportion to the population, possibly more than a thousand in a total population of four and a half million. Partly, this high number is a result of the system of higher education, which was transformed only in 2003 due to the so-called Bologna Process. Until now, it was possible to graduate as a social anthropologist without a doctoral degree. The lower degree, which took seven or eight semesters, was roughly equivalent to (but slightly superior to) a B.A., while the higher degree, which typically took three or four years more, was clearly superior to the M.A. Entitled *cand. polit.* (*candidatus politicarum*) in the social sciences, it involved fieldwork sometimes lasting a year or more, and a dissertation which was often in the 250 page range. An older degree, *mag. art.* (*magister artium*), maintained along with the *cand. polit.* system for many years, was considered slightly superior, and in fact, many university academics born before 1940 never took a doctoral degree because the *mag. art.* was considered to be almost equivalent to it.

Access to the *cand. polit.* programs was much easier than access to a doctoral program anywhere. Taking loans to finance their studies, supplemented by government grants of varying size, several hundred students carried out fieldwork, more often than not overseas, and completed their *cand.*

polit. or *mag. art.* degree in social anthropology between 1970 and 2003. They could now entitle themselves, and had a self-identity as, anthropologists. Some of the best *cand. polit./mag. art.* dissertations were published.

Since around 1990, following the introduction of a new doctoral degree roughly equivalent to the Ph.D. (*dr. polit.*), a doctorate has normally been a prerequisite for academic employment. Nevertheless, the point is that the now abandoned *cand. polit.* system has meant that a great number of Norwegians have “social anthropologist” as their professional title.

At the undergraduate level, anthropology has also been hugely popular, especially since the late 1980s. An anecdote illustrates this growth. Before the meeting with the new students in January 1990, I asked the very experienced Professor Arne Martin Klausen how many new students he expected. He shrugged, laughed and said “somewhere between 75 and 150,” indicating that the art of prediction was not a skill given high priority among anthropologists. A few minutes later, we arrived in the auditorium to meet 340 new students. Most of them would only take a year of anthropology, but it would be enough to sensitize them to its magic and its profound insight in human affairs. Many journalists, high-ranking bureaucrats and even politicians, below the age of 50, have a background in anthropology. (Even Crown Princess Mette-Marit briefly studied social anthropology at Oslo before her engagement.)

In this way, some anthropological perspectives seep into the public sphere even without the active agency of practicing anthropologists. Moreover, all Norwegian schoolchildren are exposed to a tiny bit of anthropology in the final years of their mandatory schooling (which lasts for ten years, usually followed by three years of high school). The subject *Samfunnslære*, “social studies,” includes some fragments of social anthropology, in theory making all Norwegians in their early teens aware of its existence. In high school, sociology and social anthropology is an optional subject, chosen by somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 pupils every year.

In spite of its presence alongside many other subjects in school, there may be other reasons why social anthropology is well-known in the general Norwegian population. Hardly three days pass without an anthropologist writing in the press, debating on the radio or talking on the television. As a matter of fact, in 1995, a leading journalist in *Aftenposten*, the academically educated Håkon Harket, introduced a lengthy article with the claim that while every social commentator in the 1970s seemed to think like a sociologist, they were now “carrying an embryonic anthropologist inside”: anthropological ideas about cultural difference, the significance of ethnicity, the modernity of contemporary tradition, and the sins of ethnocentrism had somehow seeped into the collective psyche. (In other countries, they might blame postmodernism for similar ailments.)

ANTHROPOLOGISTS EVERYWHERE

In a word, the presence of anthropologists in the Norwegian public sphere is exceptional. When the main liberal newspaper, *Dagbladet*, made a list of the ten most important intellectuals of the country in January 2005, followed by ten extensive interviews and a lot of noisy, but ultimately useful debate spilling into other media, three of the people on the list were anthropologists (there were none in the jury).

They appear on radio and television, write in or are interviewed by newspapers, take part in various public debates inside and outside the academic system, and publish popular books and essays. Let us therefore look briefly at some examples of anthropologists' recent interventions in the Norwegian public sphere, just to indicate the range of possible forms of participation.

The annual secondary school students' graduation involves protracted partying in public spaces, reaching a climax of sorts around 17 May, Constitution Day. The pupils, just old enough to drive and drink (although not simultaneously and certainly not in Norway), buy dilapidated old buses repainted red with risqué bon-mots and a few paid ads painted in white. Every year, concerned journalists report that "this year's partying is wilder and more irresponsible than ever before." Some years ago, an Oslo newspaper had the excellent idea to do an interview with the Argentine anthropologist Eduardo Archetti, who has lived in Norway for many years, about the phenomenon. One of his own children left school that year. Archetti explained, among other things, that for the 19-year-olds in question, this would be the first time they participated in rituals involving sex and alcohol, which was a main reason that the event was so controversial and saturated with powerful, complex symbolism. This was not exactly a message to reassure other parents perhaps, but he introduced a new perspective, and an entirely anthropological one, on a phenomenon which usually elicited predictable, worried comments from social scientists.

Some time in the autumn of 2004, on my way to giving a public talk, I happened to listen to the car radio and heard a familiar voice discoursing on the role of coffee in informal socializing. I recognized the voice as that of Runar Døving, who had recently defended his Ph.D. in anthropology, later published as a book (Døving 2004), on food and society in a coastal hamlet less than two hours out of Oslo. He described some of the typical contexts where coffee was served, adding that if you refuse someone's offer of a cup of coffee, it had better be that you are allergic or it is too late in the evening, and you are then expected to accept tea instead. He spoke at some length about the role of coffee at work (every Norwegian workplace has a semi-public space with a coffee machine) and claimed that without coffee, a

great number of social encounters would simply not take place. In another program in the series, Døving described, drawing on Mauss' classic analysis of reciprocity (Mauss 1955), the typical outraged reaction if a houseguest politely refused coffee, tea, beer, soft drinks, and so on, insisting that she "just wanted a glass of water."

Yet another anthropologist, Unni Wikan, has for years argued passionately for human rights and the right to individual choice among minority girls. In her book *Mot en ny norsk underklasse?* (Wikan 1995, 2001), Wikan argues that muddled thinking informed by wishy-washy multiculturalism and misplaced cultural relativism has deprived many second generation girls of rights that would have been self-evident for ethnic Norwegian girls. She has often written in newspapers and appeared in other media to express her views, has advised political parties, and has encountered both support and criticism from others, including anthropologists and minority researchers. The many thousand Norwegians who follow minority issues with an above average interest have over the years got the distinct, and correct, impression that the anthropologists in this country represent differing views about the group-individual relationship, and accordingly hold different views regarding policy.

Again, as I was collecting material for this book,¹ anthropologists were in the national media at least three times in as many days. First, a couple of prominent sport executives proposed that one should pick out the talents at a younger age than presently occurring, in order to improve the country's competitive edge. Anthropologist Jo Helle-Valle was interviewed in this context, and later cited by commentators. Helle-Valle, who was then carrying out research on children's sports (and had himself been a children's football coach), argued that there is no indication that talent in a sport like football is evident before puberty. He also had a few things to say about the role of sport in children's social life. Second, a Ph.D. student who had just defended his thesis about transnational football fans, Hans Hognestad, was interviewed on a full page of a Saturday daily, by a journalist who clearly understood what his research was about. Hognestad could point out, among other things, that it was a curious fact that the international fan club of Liverpool had more members in Norway than any Norwegian fan club; and that this might tell us something about the flexibility of group allegiance and the transnational potential of sport loyalties. Thirdly, on that same day, I had an op-ed article about ethnicity and "human nature" in Norway's largest daily newspaper.

It is not considered a professional duty for Norwegian anthropologists to engage with the public. Some raise their voice only rarely, to comment on issues where they are specialists or where they deem that important val-

ues are at stake. Thus, in the early days of the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, Fredrik Barth appeared on radio and wrote a newspaper article discussing what the Western powers might realistically expect to achieve if they tried to impose a Western-type democracy on Afghanistan. He was one of the few people in Norway with the professional authority to do so, and although Barth rarely appears in the media, he has a perceptible impact when he does. In fact, Barth was, in his day, something of a pioneer for public anthropology in Norway. In the late 1970s, a TV series was made featuring Barth, where he spent most of the air time sitting behind his desk at the Ethnographic Museum, showing slides and talking about his fieldwork. The series was utterly captivating, it was swiftly transformed into a bestselling book (Barth 1980), and converted many young spectators to the magic of anthropology—in its way doing the same kind of work as Granada’s “Disappearing Worlds” series did in the UK.

However, in the recent history of Norwegian public anthropology, the one person who stands out is Arne Martin Klausen, who was a professor at the Oslo department until his retirement in the late 1990s. Klausen’s first field of intervention was development assistance, where he criticized—both in academic and in public forums—the tendency among donor organizations to neglect the cultural dimension. He would later publish studies of Norwegian society, and the book he edited in 1984, *Den norske væremåten* (“The Norwegian way of life”), had a decisive impact on public debate about “Norwegianness.” The chapters dealt with topics such as the local community as totem, equality as a key value, and conflict avoidance. Tellingly, there was nothing about hybridity, creolisation or immigrants in the book. A decade later, such an omission would have been perceived as a mortal sin.

Klausen, who led a group of researchers studying the 1994 Winter Olympics as a ritual celebrating modernity (Klausen 1999), always maintained in his lectures that anthropologists should be relativists away and critics at home. He sees anthropology as a generalist’s discipline opposed to the fragmenting specialization typical of knowledge production in fully modern societies. In a word, Klausen tried to teach a generation of anthropologists that they should be quintessential intellectuals: their job at home consisted in approaching society from a slanted angle, saying unexpected and sometimes unpopular things, adding width and depth to society’s self-reflection.

Moreover, anthropologists are routinely contacted by organizations and media, asked about their opinions or invited to give public talks on some topic of general interest. This is not the case, for example, in the USA. A few years ago, on a visit to Norway, Michael Herzfeld mentioned that he would like to reach a greater audience with his work, but alas, anthropology books sold poorly. Fredrik Barth suggested that he give a few talks to associations

or organizations outside the university, in order to get to know his potential readership better. Herzfeld saw the proposition as being entirely unrealistic. How on earth should he get in contact with such associations? (Gullestad 2003).

THE EGALITARIANISM OF NORWEGIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Some years ago, I asked a British colleague, who now worked in a non-anthropology department, how she felt about not working as an anthropologist any more. Slightly annoyed by the question, she said with great emphasis that she was relieved to have left anthropology, maintaining that social anthropology, at least in the UK, was incredibly snobbish, turning its nose resolutely up at anything smacking of populism or “not proper anthropology,” and saturated with an ancient Oxbridge spirit totally out of tune with the contemporary world. The media are regarded with a great amount of condescension, she intimated, and popularization and “impure” engagements with the outside world (which might compromise one’s integrity as one of the selected few) were viewed with deep suspicion.

These remarks led me to recall the situation in Norway, where social anthropology has enjoyed a reputation as an anti-elitist kind of activity, an unruly anarchist science of great-coated, ruffled men with unpolished shoes and strange views, since the mid twentieth century. In many nonacademic observers’ view, it compares favorably with the humanities, where the western canonical traditions still tend to be reproduced in an almost monastic way, and even with subjects like sociology, where the reverence for ancestors like Weber and Durkheim (“the classics”) can sometimes make lectures sound like sermons. Norwegian journalists contact anthropologists for comments on current affairs every day of the week—be it a royal wedding, a sport scandal or recent political changes in a third world country—and the anthropologists play an important part in public debate.

However, what struck me at the time of the conversation was not this difference, but the fact that although many Norwegian anthropologists now study aspects of their own society, the vast majority of us know much more about contemporary African witchcraft and sacrifice in Eastern Indonesia, than about the way of life typical of the domestic working class, which could easily be observed by a twenty minute tube ride from the leafy, bourgeois environment of the university campus. No anthropologist stepped forward and tried to explain, on the basis of ethnographic research, why, for example, a substantial part of the working class had recently changed its political alignment from Labour to the populist, anti-immigration Progress Party.

The fact is that there is a certain otherworldliness about academic anthropology virtually everywhere. Therein lies its charm for the wider public, perhaps. While a sociologist or political scientist might deal with, say, Olympic Games in terms of the global economy, power abuse in the IOC or domestic nationalism, an anthropologist would be more likely to see it in the light of Western individualism and the cult of modernity, and would presumably interpret it as a ritual, drawing on a century of research on rituals in nonliterate societies. Anthropology can offer slanted and skewed, unexpected and thought provoking perspectives on apparently pedestrian and mundane matters. This has made some anthropologists darlings of the media in Norway, but the very same quality of the subject has led its practitioners to withdraw elsewhere. To put it differently: in spite of its considerable growth, anthropology still cultivates its self-identity as a counterculture, its members belonging to a kind of secret society whose initiates possess exclusive keys for understanding, indispensable for making sense of the world, but alas, largely inaccessible for outsiders.

Jonathan Spencer (2000), in an account of British anthropology in its main period of demographic expansion from the 1960s to the 1980s, points out that the dominant figures of the discipline shuddered at the thought of introducing anthropology in secondary schools (see also Shore 1996). Leach argued: "It could be very confusing to learn about other people's moral values before you have confident understanding of your own" (quoted in Spencer 2000: 3). As a result of the anthropologists' refusal to adapt their subject to "A"-level requirements, thousands of young Britons have learnt the rudiments of sociology and psychology in their late teens, while hardly anybody has been exposed to anthropology.

The anthropologists simply did not want their subject to become too popular. Fearing the influx of former colonial officers and young idealists who were interested in applying anthropology to non-academic pursuits, the establishment reacted by purifying the subject even further. At the main British universities there were no curricula, but instead very extensive reading lists. Textbooks were rarely used. Again, Leach expressed a dominant sentiment when he stated:

It must be emphasised to such potential students [who were interested in nonacademic employment] that the prospects of ever being employed as a professional social anthropologists (*sic*) are extremely small ... I would personally be horrified if it became apparent that the "syllabus design" ... was slanted towards "applied anthropology." (Leach quoted in Spencer 2000: 7)

In the USA, causes of the diminished engagement with the outside world differed. For one thing, anthropology has always been much larger, both

thematically and in terms of demography, in the USA than in any European country. The Association of Social Anthropologists in the UK has a membership of slightly over 500, while the American Anthropological Association has nearly 12,000 members (Mills 2003: 13). In other words, although the population of the US is only six times that of Britain, there are 24 times as many organized anthropologists.

Yet anthropology fails to make significant inroads in the general intellectual discourse on the other side of the Atlantic as well. Popularization and refraining from minding one's own professional business are not activities that add to one's academic credentials. In a situation with fierce competition for few jobs, it pays more to write journal articles in the style of one's teachers than to popularize or enter into general discussions with non-colleagues. More generally, there is a deep abyss between academics and the general public in the US and, as argued by Russell Jacoby (1987), there nowadays seem to be few public spaces available for American intellectuals outside the academy itself.

WHAT DO THE MEDIA WANT?

One of the few metropolitan anthropologists who has a regular media presence is Micaela di Leonardo, who writes for *The Nation* and is occasionally contacted by mainstream media for comments on various current issues. She takes a less rosy view of the anthropologist–journalist relationship than I have done so far in this chapter. So when does “the fourth estate” contact di Leonardo? With almost audible exasperation, she lists some of the occasions when she has been rung up by journalists (di Leonardo 1998). One TV producer wanted her views on why some men are sexually attracted to very obese women. Another wanted her to take part in a Valentine's Day show on love and courtship ritual, and she has also been asked for her views on why “symmetry” seems to arouse people sexually all over the world. Yet another journalist wanted a capsule anthropological analysis of why women were buying Wonderbras. (As a non-American non-woman, I do not have a clue as to what Wonderbras are, and I do not think I am going to find out.) She has also been asked for her thoughts on why, “despite so many decades of feminism, American women still enlisted the aids of hair dye, makeup, plastic surgery and diets. Didn't that prove that we were genetically encoded to attract men to impregnate us and protect our offspring?” Finally, “a Good Morning America producer begged me to appear on a show with the theme ‘Is Infidelity Genetic?’” (di Leonardo 1998: 354).

These examples reminds one of Johan Galtung's term "pyjama sociology," coined after he had been contacted by a journalist who wanted the sociologist's explanation of the decline in pyjama use in the Western world (Galtung, personal communication). The trivialization of serious knowledge entailed in the examples is obvious, and in addition, all the examples mentioned by di Leonardo indicate the prevalence of a pop version of genetic reductionism, which is incidentally less widespread in Europe than in the USA—not that it is entirely unknown on this side of the Atlantic either. The now retired anthropology professor Arne Martin Klausen once served on an expert panel in a popular science magazine in Norway, but he resigned after only a few months. The only questions he received, as a "scientific expert in anthropology," were of the generic kind "why do the Negroes (*sic*) have kinky hair?"

However, I must say that my own experience is different. Whenever I am contacted by the Scandinavian media for comments on current affairs, they typically ask for comments on social and cultural issues. During the last week, journalists have phoned or emailed me for comments on national differences in leadership styles, following an international survey which indicated that such differences might be consequential, on the cultural changes that took place in the 1980s following the worldwide political turn to the right, on the roots of contemporary Norwegian nationalism in 19th century romanticism (this was an Italian journalist visiting), on the new, proposed university law which threatens to remove the last remnants of democratic governance in universities, on the images of Norway projected abroad by the Foreign Ministry—and finally, I was asked to review the Indian author Arundhati Roy's latest collection of critical interventions. Sounds like heaven? Well, not quite. The agenda is set by the media, and our job largely consists in filling in a few details or offering a soundbite or two—or deciding not to, in which case they sooner or later find another academic who is willing to do so. Now, it would not be a self-serving or even relevant view that newspapers are evil incarnate. Granted, they are not peer reviewed journals, but anthropologists can still often contribute a drop of complexity, a hint of doubt or a subversive remark. Given that our existence depends on our licence to quote from others and indeed to describe their lives, we should not be above allowing others to quote us.

This ought not to be taken to imply that there should be no limits whatsoever. Anthropology can, for example, easily be reduced to a form of light entertainment by the media in what di Leonardo speaks of, disparagingly, as "the anthropological gambit": "The attribution of 'our' characteristics to 'them,' and vice versa, is always good for a laugh in popular culture" (di

Leonardo 1998: 57). This facile juxtaposition of “us” and “them,” in her view, obliterates concrete power relations, context and tormented histories, and serves only to trivialize cultural differences. In this spirit, she attacks Lévi-Strauss’ speech given at his admission in the Collège de France, where the revered master compares that ritual of admission with a similar ritual involving symbolic power among a group of Canadian Indians. In di Leonardo’s harsh words, this “droll likening of a powerful, state-sponsored intelligentsia to a powerless group of North Americans is an example of chutzpah as obscenity” (1998: 66). I fail to see the obscenity and do not think, as a rule, that there is too much humor and laughter in the attempts by anthropologists to communicate to outsiders. Comparison can be stupid, superficial and misleading, but at the end of the day, even Gary Larson-type comparisons can bring us slightly closer to each other. Audiences are not uncritical receptacles, and “the anthropological gambit” can help them to laugh not just at the follies of their leaders, but even, occasionally, at themselves.

A number of contrasts can be posited between academic research and journalism, making for an unruly and frustrating relationship. Foremost among those is the contrast pertaining to speed: academic work is slow, while journalism is fast. Associated with this is the contrast between complexity and simplification. Journalists typically present issues in everyday language, work under serious constraints regarding both time and length, and are usually expected to tell stories with a simple message.

In most societies, moreover, the craft of journalism is not highly regarded. In the rich countries, journalism is increasingly associated with the sensationalism and commercial bias of the tabloid press. Surveys about public trustworthiness indicate that in North Atlantic countries like Britain and Norway, journalists are to be found near the bottom, along with politicians.

Media frequently ask academics to contribute, to allow themselves to be interviewed, and to furnish journalists with relevant facts. Many academics routinely refuse to cooperate with the media, given the very considerable differences in aims and methods between research and journalism. It can often be appropriate for academics to remain aloof from the media world. Their views are likely to be represented in simplistic ways by the journalists, and the kind of research they are committed to is often irrelevant to the media anyway. It nevertheless occasionally happens that the fields of interest between the two professions converge. In the case of social anthropology, this is increasingly the case in so far as the growing numbers of anthropologists study contemporary modern societies, on topics where there is already considerable media interest, such as multiethnic society and migration, national cultures and cultural change, changing kinship structures, so-called new work, tourism, consumption, and so on.

So anthropology does have a strong media presence in Norway, where anthropologists regularly comment on current events, write op-ed articles, debate minority issues on television, write polemical books for general audiences, and so on. In this engagement, it is easy to see the predictable dilemmas: the academic qualities of the anthropologist's work disappears, and only his or her opinions come across. The anthropologist's views appear in a context defined by other considerations than those which initially motivated his or her intervention, and the outcome may be frustrating to the academic, who feels betrayed and misunderstood.

On the other hand, several anthropologists have become highly skilled at using the media to influence public opinion, some of them functioning as public intellectuals with their own political agendas and the ability to explain them. The relationship between media and academics should thus not be seen as a form of one-way parasitism, but as a complex relationship where there is a struggle over the definition of the situation. Mainstream mass media may even have an untapped potential as vehicles for complex ideas.

ANTHROPOLOGY AS SPEED BUMP

Engaging in fast-paced media debate can nevertheless be compromising: one may be tempted to oversimplify, and besides, academics rarely win media debates with journalists, who know the ins and outs of fast communication better than we do. The lengthy, widely publicized debate between anthropologist Marianne Gullestad and journalist Shabana Rehman in late summer 2002, which I have analyzed elsewhere (Eriksen 2003), shows that the swirling world of the fast media is not always compatible with meticulous, calm argument. Characteristically, Rehman at one point jeered at academics for being busy discussing racism in Norway instead of demonstrating against enforced marriages. Gullestad responded that she had been working on the book in question (Gullestad 2002) for four years. Yet anthropologists can have an important role as agents of slowness, contributing their drop of complexity and a more complex, elaborate way of communicating than that which is common. Sometimes, this necessitates switching to another medium.

Following a controversial television documentary about female circumcision, which documented that the practice existed among certain immigrants to Norway, a journalist with the largest Norwegian newspaper, *VG*, decided to write an opinion piece on the issue. She duly contacted Aud Talle, who had done fieldwork in Kenya, Tanzania, Somalia, and among Somali women in London. Talle faxed her an article describing the social and

cultural embeddedness of the practice, as well as explaining the practice on the phone. Soon after, *VG* published an article on female circumcision illustrated by an image of a veiled, chained woman trotting behind a brisk and confident female anthropologist. The story objected against the “cultural relativism” of the anthropologists, who preferred to study circumcision as an exotic rite rather than trying to combat it.

At first, Talle was uncertain as to how she should react. Eventually, she decided not to write a response in the newspaper itself. The fast media, she reckoned, were simply unable to accommodate the kind of detail necessary in an account which had to take all the relevant factors into consideration. So she wrote a book instead, *Om kvinneleg omskjering* (“On female circumcision,” Talle 2003). The book was published a year after the newspaper commentary, and it is written in a popular style. It ends with a few policy recommendations, where Talle makes an interesting comparison between North-East African female circumcision and Chinese footbinding, suggesting that the successful campaign against the latter practice a hundred years ago might inspire similar strategies today. Her main arguments are the ones we expect from a social anthropologist, and which are, incidentally, rare in general public debate: circumcision has to be understood as an individual experience, but also in terms of cultural meaning and social interests.

Predictably, Talle’s book was not reviewed by *VG* nor by any of the other mainstream media. But it had its share of attention in the small elite media, and—more importantly—it began to be used by health workers and public servants, who are often reminded of their need to understand why certain immigrants do certain things. This example shows how anthropologists can function as speed bumps in the public sphere, why it sometimes pays to be patient. Talle’s book has an expected longevity which exceeds *VG* newspaper articles by years.

Yet, it cannot be denied that there are some genuine dilemmas here. Since the late 1980s, I have taken part in more radio and TV programs than I care to remember; I have done short, long, and portrait interviews with all kinds of media, written a great number of columns, book reviews, and longer op-ed pieces in nearly all the major newspapers in Norway, and contributed frequently to national newspapers in Denmark and Sweden as well. Obviously, if it were possible, I would have deleted some of these media appearances, especially on television, from the historical record. For years, I would defend the view that if you were given one minute on national television to tell your fellow citizens that say, terrorism has nothing to do with Islam, that “traditional” Norwegian culture is a modern invention with a commercial face and a political one, or that it is a widespread feeling among immigrants that they get the worst from both worlds; then that single min-

ute would still be better than nothing. Experience now tells me that this is not necessarily the case. Far too often, I have felt co-opted by the entertainment industry after initially entering the studio expecting a serious debate. Yet, the condescending attitude displayed towards the mainstream media *as such* among many academics, is too crude, categorical, and misinformed to be helpful. It is also ultimately undemocratic. If people who see themselves as enlightened do not try to shape opinions in their environment, who would they rather leave the task to? There is a great difference between talking to a journalist on the phone about why it might be that adults no longer wear pyjamas in our part of the world, and taking part in a forty minutes long radio program about the 2004 tsunami, risk, human rights, the Lisbon earthquake, and vulnerability. Trivialization should not be conflated with interventions that might make a difference. And there is an important qualitative difference between writing a 1,000 word op-ed article about the shortcomings of genetic determinism and talking for thirty seconds about the same topic on television. In other words, for those who fear the loss of their academic virtue, the question ought not to be for or against public interventions, but rather which kind of intervention through what kind of media. Besides, if we take a large view of things, it is probably better both for the subject's reputation and for the quality of public discourse if some practitioners occasionally make simplistic statements in the media, than if they all remained silent in the wider public sphere. It is easy to blame the contemporary media—shallow, sensationalist, profit-oriented—for the relative absence of anthropologists, but the argument can go both ways. Perhaps the unchecked superficiality and trivialism of contemporary mass media (especially television), where every issue, no matter how serious, seems to be turned into some form of entertainment, has been able to progress without meeting serious resistance, precisely because intellectuals have been busy talking to each other for the last few decades.

Real dilemmas nevertheless remain. Recently, a political scientist was contacted by a journalist writing a feature story about the situation in Chechnya. The researcher was a regional expert who thought it important to tell the public that the Islamic character of the Chechen uprising was a recent invention; that the Chechen movement was rooted in nineteenth century anti-imperial political nationalism. Getting this message across might not just influence citizens' views of the Chechen conflict, but it could also in a small way mollify the growing resentment against Islam and Muslims generally. However, it was a busy day, and the researcher had already made her point several times on radio and television during the last weeks, and so she told the journalist that she was not keen on talking about it right now. His reply was, "All right then, s'pose I'll just write something then," implying

that without her expert comments, he would have to make his own amateur inferences. She acquiesced in the end, allowing herself to be blackmailed by the journalist for the sake of the public good.

Possibly, she was aware of the double-edged reward that comes from engagement with the public sphere is the possibility that one's own shortcomings and weaknesses are illuminated by relevant criticism from unexpected quarters. There is real danger in exposing oneself in this way, but if anthropology is going to influence the dominant patterns of thought in the anthropologist's own society, there is no other way.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What's so special about Norway then? It is not easy to see why it should be there and not in Sweden, Denmark, Finland or the Netherlands, that anthropology should have such a powerful public presence. The explanation is unlikely to be elegant, and it is bound to involve several factors, including fortuitous coincidences. Firstly, schoolchildren are exposed to a little bit of anthropology (although this is a fairly recent development). Secondly, we were lucky to have individuals like Gjessing, Barth, and Klausen, who went out of their way to engage a larger public. Thirdly, the egalitarianism of the subject in Norway—unlike in Britain or Germany—created a space for the anthropologist as eccentric, which could be played without negative sanctions from the academy. Fourthly, the media pluralism of Norway (nine newspapers are published only in Oslo) offers a varied mediascape with many opportunities to express oneself. Fifthly, these four factors have created an awareness in the media, in the public service, and in organizations, of the exciting potentials inherent in the anthropological perspective. The fact that many Norwegian anthropologists now carry out research in Norway itself adds to their perceived social relevance (cf. Rugkåsa and Thorsen 2003).

NOTE

1. The material for this chapter is based on my recent book (Eriksen 2005).

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