

## ANTHROPOLOGY NOW AND NEXT



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Essays in Honor of Ulf Hannerz

Edited by  
**Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Christina Garsten,  
and Shalini Randeria**



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**Ulf Hannerz**

Photo by Kirin Narayan



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# Introduction



## ULF HANNERZ AND THE MILITANT MIDDLE GROUND

*Shalini Randeria, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, and Christina Garsten*

Ulf Hannerz' published work spans more than four decades to date and has, since the beginning, contributed to shaping and reshaping the world of anthropology. The very titles of some of his major books—*Soulside* (1969), *Exploring the City* (1980), *Cultural Complexity* (1992), *Transnational Connections* (1996), *Foreign News* (2004), and *Anthropology's World* (2010)—reveal an anthropologist who has consistently been ahead of his time in exploring subjects that were not yet the academic fashion. Yet he has been both conversant with, and drawing energy from, his peers and the traditions of the discipline on both sides of the Atlantic, just as he has been contributing to extending the frontiers of the discipline. Through Hannerz' interest in networks, for instance, the influence of the pioneering analyses of the Manchester School (Gluckman, Clyde Mitchell, Epstein, and others) is acknowledged and evident. Yet Hannerz uses their approach not to study the dynamics of urbanization in southern Africa, but to explore transnational connections in a world on the move. In his dismissal of a clunky mid-twentieth century concept of culture, Hannerz acknowledges inspiration from anthropologists like Anthony Wallace, who wrote of culture in terms of "the organization of diversity." But his reflections on creolization add an original conceptualization, as does his emphasis on cultural complexity. His fine-grained ethnographies of urban life in Africa and the U.S.A. are in dialogue with a broad range of theoretical perspectives from both anthropology and sociology. His approach to urban life and cosmopolitanism, for instance, owes a debt to classical sociologists like Georg Simmel. For his writings on city life see it not merely as a recipe for alienation, but also as a potential means to liberation.

These and other continuities with twentieth-century social science need to be emphasized because so many of the topics and perspectives introduced in Hannerz' work appear to be novel. Indeed, many were novel for the discipline of anthropology. He was among the first

to explore the relevance of modern mass media using ethnographic methods; he suggested to see culture in terms of flows rather than as bounded entities, as a result proposing new analytical terms such as “the global ecumene,” “cultural creolization” and “network of networks.” And though he was by no means the first urban anthropologist, Hannerz was among the first to see cities as cultural crossroads chiefly characterized by their urbanity, not by their constituent cultural or ethnic groups. His scholarship has thus consistently shown the limitations of confining our understanding of processes and phenomena to the localities in which we happen to study them. It has emphasized instead the need to keep in mind translocal flows and entanglements irrespective of where our research is carried out or on what theme.

It is thus mainly with the anthropology of globalization that Hannerz’ name is associated inside and outside the discipline today. But as this collection shows, his *œuvre* covers a broad range of anthropological subject areas and has inspired colleagues whose work is very diverse. His work was also pioneering in that it called into question, and transcended in subtle but significant ways, the traditional disciplinary division of labor between anthropology and sociology. He carried out fieldwork in West Africa and in the U.S., an unusual undertaking for an anthropologist of his generation; he was equally at ease doing participant observation among poor African-American urban communities as he was, later, in interviewing cosmopolitan foreign correspondents all over the world. His rich ethnographic studies of these diverse contexts draw attention to the long-obsolete binary between the West and the rest as markers of disciplinary boundaries between sociology and anthropology, or between “us” and “them.” Hannerz is a master at building bridges across rifts that may seem, to others, insurmountable, both in his anthropological analyses and in his theoretical inspirations. In his writings, strong impulses from American cultural anthropology merge seamlessly with the European microsociological traditions of network analysis and the Malinowskian-Barthian concern with individual agency. The division of labor between the study of culture and the study of society devised by Parsons and Kluckhohn in the 1950s (Kuper 1999) vanishes without a trace in Hannerz’ work, which could perhaps be described as a form of intellectual Hinduism as opposed to the polemical monotheisms engaged in turf wars elsewhere in the global intellectual ecumene.

His ethnographic studies link the small to the large, moving effortlessly from fine-grained empirical analyses to theoretical issues, commenting in the process on some of the most salient transformations of the contemporary world. Small wonder then that his work has been

widely read and well received both within and outside the confines of the discipline. Lucid in exposition, measured in tone, and with a refreshing lack of dogmatic tendencies or intellectual hobbyhorses, his essays are a delight to read not least for the wonderful, wry sense of humor with which they expound on a variety of issues in the contemporary world. They have thus done much to foster familiarity with, and respect for, an anthropological perspective on a wide range of subjects ranging from transnational processes, cultural complexity, networks, or urban transformations to fashion, music, or journalism. Catholic in his reading, sympathetic in his writings about others and a beacon of lucidity in developing his own thought, Hannerz appears to inhabit a monist world rather than a dualist or Manichean one; a world where complementarity and the “both–and” principle reign rather than conflict and “either–or.” If there is one issue that runs through his entire scholarship, it is his consistent engagement with the kind of world we inhabit today and his striving to explore its changing contours.

An excellent writer in Swedish as well as in English, Ulf Hannerz’ work in his native language tends to be more literary and informal than his academic publications, but his perspective on “the world in creolization” remains consistent. His fascination with the paradoxes of globalization and the deep humanism underlying his reflections come across beautifully in books such as *Café du Monde* (2011). As the reviewer in *Svenska Dagbladet* put it:

It is a pleasure to read Hannerz’ relaxed and stylish prose, full of exciting and important observations about anything from North American ghetto culture and postcolonialism to the particularities of the professional culture of foreign correspondents and the new forms of political power in a globalised world. Hannerz speaks with a fine formulation about the necessity of “the big conversation across cultural boundaries.” (Persson 2011)

Viewed in the context of Hannerz’ own writings about centers and peripheries, and not least his early collaborative work with Tomas Gerholm on non-metropolitan anthropologies (Hannerz and Gerholm 1982), it makes perfect sense that one of the most persuasive and influential contributions to the bridging of disparate anthropological flows and currents should come from a relatively peripheral country such as Sweden (see also Hannerz 2010). Here too his scholarship can be seen as a forerunner of what is today the debate around “world anthropologies,” a project in the making, which has been subsequently institutionalized in the World Council of Anthropological Associations (WCAA). Ahead of his time, he addressed questions of anthropological knowledge production from a variety of locations and national tradi-

tions, but also pointed out that multiple transnational linkages shaped these differences too. Acutely aware of the importance of being attentive to the diversity of traditions within Europe and loci of knowledge outside Euro-American centers, Hannerz played an important role in the establishment of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), which he continues to support in a variety of ways. His unfailing presence and capacity for dialogue at EASA and American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings has also contributed to the strengthening the ties between the two associations and communities of anthropologists. A quiet institution-builder, he is as attentive a listener and reader as he is prolific as a writer.

Ulf Hannerz belongs to that minority of anthropologists who have throughout their careers been bilingual in their writings. Not surprisingly, therefore, he has also argued for the importance of valuing publications in languages other than English, a point that he found necessary to make in the context of the audit culture driving evaluation of academic performance and excellence across Europe. Interestingly, his argument for the need to publish in various languages was driven neither by concerns about the hegemony of the English language nor primarily by a concern for publishing in languages accessible to those about whom we as anthropologists write and who are interlocutors in the "field." But with his insistence on valorizing non-English publications, he was equally concerned to foster the public engagement of anthropologists in their own societies as well as encouraging the kind of intellectual pluralism that results from the lived experience of sociocultural diversity. He very rightly reminds us that anthropologists write for a variety of publics: national and transnational, in academia and outside it. He thus makes a forceful argument for the need for us as anthropologists to engage with, and intervene in, public debates in our own countries of origin or residence by writing in the national language(s) in order to address a public outside academia and render our scholarship relevant to it. As a citizen-anthropologist and a public intellectual, Hannerz has not shied away from such intervention on matters academic and non-academic.

In the two decades that have passed since the publication of what was arguably Hannerz' most significant theoretical statement, *Cultural Complexity* (1992), the world has witnessed significant and accelerated change. Retrospectively, the book can be read as a prophetic statement about an incipient world and a program on how to study it. Its main line of argument has largely been made even more relevant by subsequent events, and the methodologies Hannerz developed to study unbounded cultural flows around 1990 now seem virtually tailor-made

for research on phenomena such as deterritorialized warfare, Facebook events, migrant remittances, international terrorism, and mobile telephony. Indeed, Ulf Hannerz' more recent works testify to his keen eye not only for the present, but also for the crafting of scenarios for the future and the creation of future imaginaries (see e.g., Hannerz 2009).

Rarely overtly political, Hannerz' work nevertheless has clear political implications in its destabilization of concepts of bounded societies and cultures, and questioning of commonly held assumptions about the nature of social identity. Sensitive to cultural differences and aware of the frictions emerging from accelerated encounters, he shows the limitations of analyses positing "groups" or "cultures" as fundamental units, calling for more nuanced descriptions and more flexible analyses that make space for the paradoxical, the unexpected, and the new. As noted by Ronald Stade and Gudrun Dahl in an earlier appreciation of Hannerz' work: "Today, in a time of dystopias about clashing civilizations and coming anarchies, a cool-headed analysis of global processes that can provide tools for investigating cultural complexity may prove to be the best cure" (Stade and Dahl 2003: 203).

Perhaps the main question raised in Hannerz' wide-ranging but consistent work over more than forty years is simply, "Who are we?" or rather, "What does the word we mean?" He has helped us (*us?*) raise the question in new ways without reification or the dismantling of collectivities into atomistic individuals, which would have amounted to poor sociological thinking. In this move towards a more flexible understanding of the word *we*, Hannerz' work stands out not only as a contribution to social theory, but also—and in this we concur with Stade and Dahl—as a toolbox for dealing with the complexities of the new century both in terms of understanding and of practice. "Culture," as Hannerz rightly notes (1999), is often referred to today in contexts of conflict, and assumptions of cultural fundamentalism often become associated with xenophobia. On the other hand, a "cultural celebrationism" that tends to view cultural phenomena and processes in purely, or primarily, aesthetic and performative terms runs the risk of disregarding tensions around cultural difference. Hannerz proposes instead a processual view of culture as "work in progress" as one way out of this impasse and as an intellectual and practical resource for contemporary forms of belonging, such as citizenship.

Although Hannerz' contributions to anthropology have, in a substantial sense, largely concerned transnationalism, creolization, and globalization, they have implications for culture theory and theorizing of the social in general. Combining his decentering of the concept of culture with his interest in the complexities of interpersonal relations

as a starting point, a next step, taken by several of the contributors to this volume, amounts to an exploration of the nature of the social, of cohesion and communication, in the ever shifting contemporary world.

Many languages distinguish between several words referring to different kinds of collectivities but which must perforce all be translated with the word *we* in most European languages; for example, “we, who are together in this room now,” “we, that is you and I,” “we, but one that excludes you,” “we, that is my clan,” or “we, the people of Z.” The inclusion and exclusion denoted by the word *we* is, obviously, contingent on context and circumstance. When European politicians speak, possibly unthinkingly, about “our children and the immigrants’ children” in debates about, for example, ethnic-minority numbers in schools, they reproduce notions of ethnic nationhood which are being contested by others. What is required to constitute a “we,” be it big or small, depends on the context. While it may suffice in some contexts to take the bus together to feel ourselves to be part of a “we,” in other contexts, it may be necessary to share language, religion, or place of origin.

Any complex society offers an almost infinite number of possible criteria for delineating subjective communities for whom the term “we” can be used meaningfully: Us, the members of the Swedish People’s Party in Finland. Us commuters. Us lesbians. Us jazz musicians. Us Christians. Us copywriters. Us women. The question of commonality in collectivities remains, and is made acutely relevant in modern societies with regard to the underlying symbolic basis for a shared subjective identity that is overarching and totalizing, and which can make it meaningful still to speak of a country as a society that is something other than a mere administrative entity. Methodological nationalism, which limits the social to the boundaries of a nation-state, has come in for criticism as insufficient for identifying and understanding fundamental social processes taking place today, which are transnational as well as national and often blur the distinction between the two as well.

Nationalist ideology has likewise been criticized, often along normative lines, for standing in the way of a universalistic humanism. Yet, the nation still has, in many parts of the world, an indisputable and enduring ability to create strong abstract ties of community contrary to what many theorists of globalization predicted towards the end of the last century. The political struggles and debates dividing many European societies these days do not concern the nation as such, but how it should be delineated symbolically and demographically; who should be included, and on what conditions. The nation must now share the field of belonging with various other symbolic communities, many of them transnational, but it remains an important focus for identification.

Whether it succeeds or fails in relation to different persons and groups depends on what it has to offer, instrumentally and symbolically. The nation, seen as a metaphorical kin group or an abstract community, is nonetheless under pressure, thanks to a large number of transnational, supranational, and subnational processes that do not conform to its logic and indeed appear to threaten it. Yet a certain degree of national cohesion seems necessary for the functioning of economy, the public sphere, and civil society, since such institutions presuppose trust. A society arguably needs a "social glue," whether or not it is of the kind intimated by Godelier in his thoughtful analysis of changes wrought by colonialism and incipient modernity among the Baruya (Godelier 2009).

Nations were never homogeneous, even before the recent history of transmigration. As has been shown, it is possible to identify considerable cultural variation within any nation, and this variation does not necessarily follow ethnic lines. In terms of dialect, way of life, the role of religion, and kinship practices, intraethnic diversity is considerable even in small countries such as the Nordic ones. However, this kind of variation does not necessarily imply variation regarding the strength or degree of national identification. Jan Petter Blom demonstrated many years ago (Blom 1969) that there existed considerable cultural variation between mountain farmers and lowland farmers in central southern Norway, with no socially significant consequences for collective identification or exclusion/inclusion. There were no norms of endogamy or concerted politics of identity, in spite of clearly observable cultural differences.

This example shows that whereas culture is continuous, identities are discontinuous. Understood as symbolic universes of meaning, cultures flow and mix; one is influenced by one's experiences, surroundings, and impulses from near and afar, and many such impulses do in fact flow quite freely, unhampered by state boundaries, guardians of cultural borders, or capitalist profitability. Collective identity, on the other hand, is bounded: either one is a member of the group or one is not, necessitating criteria for group membership. The disjuncture between cultural flows and group identities is at the heart of contestations over the drawing of these boundaries. The central question in many societies today concerns the criteria for belonging. As far as the nation is concerned, Ernest Gellner famously wrote that nationalist ideology construes cultural boundaries as coterminous with political boundaries (Gellner 1983: 1), which is to say that a state should ideally only contain people of the same kind. Such a definition begs the question concerning the logic of national boundaries, however, since there is no consensus