

# Den umistelige: Remembering Thomas Hylland Eriksen

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“One of the more positive sides of being in the hospital long term is the experience of time that slows down, which enables you to think through the long and the short time each of us has at our disposal. In such a situation, you don’t feel the need to ask yourself what is at stake in life; it is fully obvious.”

(Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Syv meninger med livet* [Seven meanings of life], Kagge Forlag, 2022, p. 161, translation of ZS)

On the Wednesday evening of 27 November 2024, I was reading Kirsten Hastrup’s text about anthropology on the edge. I was supposed to give a lecture based on it the day after, in a course in environmental anthropology I teach at the University of Hradec Králové. A message on my phone sent by a colleague from Svalbard caught my attention: “Hi Zdenka, I have just read ‘your’ Thomas died today. The Norwegian media are full of the news. I am sorry.” Kari Spjeldnæs, the wife of Thomas whom I met during my fieldwork in Longyearbyen where she accompanied her husband, published on her Facebook profile the following words: “Our Thomas, my beloved husband and the kind father of our children, passed away tonight, peacefully and forever.” During the few weeks that passed since Thomas’s death, I have been in touch with several international colleagues from the anthropological community. All of us experience the loss, significant for the discipline of social anthropology, as personal. All of us have used his textbooks, read his articles, and become inspired by his lectures. Not only Thomas’s closest ones, but a whole crowd of people he collaborated with during his extraordinarily

fruitful career and whom he taught considered Thomas “theirs” because he played a significant role in their lives.

I was brave enough to send an email in 2015 to which I did not even seriously expect to get an answer. But the answer came the day after, together with an invitation letter thanks to which (and thanks to Norway Funds) I could leave for two weeks to work-shadow the leading European anthropologist at the Department of Social Anthropology in Oslo. Thomas took me with him to a conference in Tromsø in Northern Norway. While sitting at the airport, I asked him what it felt like to be an anthropological legend. “You know what, I am just an ordinary guy.”

This ordinary guy supported me again one year later, at that time already with the severe diagnosis of pancreas cancer, which was, however, possible to operate on, and Thomas was not giving in. First, I tried to raise funds for the idea of a long-term ethnographic study in Longyearbyen at the Czech Science Foundation, but received an unforgiving review including the following words: “According to unofficial information, Professor Eriksen is seriously ill and despite his gesture of good will unlikely to be able to partake in the project in any substantial manner.” Many times during the years to come, I remembered the anonymous reviewer with great satisfaction when reading Thomas’s replies to my queries during conducting and analysing the data from my fieldwork (which was in the end supported by the MSCA-IF CZ grant scheme). Thomas used to write me back from Mauritius, from Cape Town and other places he visited for work during the eight years he lived with pancreas cancer. During that time, he delivered an incredible amount of work, out of which mentoring my project was just an insignificant part. It is hard to express the gratitude I feel when I look back at every well-formulated and always friendly email I got from him, every warm and enriching conversation in Ljubljana, Prague, Vienna, or Oslo where our paths happily crossed while attending anthropological events. I would never stand where I do now without Thomas. The most precious thing about Thomas was not his anthropological expertise, his all-encompassing knowledge, his ability to speak about complex issues in simple words, or his engagement in the public debate. His caring and trusting personality, his life wisdom gained (perhaps not only) thanks to the prematurely received news about his deathly illness turned him into a human being who was keen on helping others grow.

His last book published in the summer of 2024 is called *Det umistelige*, freely translated as *What we ought not lose*. The importance of mutual entanglement of biological and cultural diversity was his last research interest, after decades of contributing to the topics of identity, ethnicity, nationalism, extractivism, globalisation, and climate change. He wrote over 60 books, hundreds of articles, his



The author of the text consults with T. H. Eriksen

Photo Vojtěch Vančura

texts were translated into 30 languages. And still he preferred to listen to others than to himself.

Once I ended my email, in which I reacted to him informing me about his yet again deteriorated health, with a phrase “Take care.” Thomas wrote back in an instant: “People keep telling me to look after myself. Well, that is not the problem. If I’m getting chemo on these days, it is not something I choose ‘in order to feel better’, it is an order from medics who are trying their best to keep me alive for a while. So it is not a choice, and it’s not about looking after myself, it is far more imperative than that. There are certain things, even in a neoliberal world, which are not subject to individual choice — and to many, this comes as a surprise. So that is why I get mails which say, clearly with the best intentions, ‘sorry that you are not feeling well’. My feelings have nothing to do with this particular situation. I have placed my destiny in the hands of people whom I trust.” The way in which Thomas handled his illness is inspiring for me just as much as the way he did anthropology, how he popularised it and how he cared about people he worked with. Am I idealising him? Whatever. I need role models in my life.

We met in person for the last time in November 2023 when we presented together my book *The Paradox of Svalbard* in the Literature House in Oslo. In July 2024 we had a lively email exchange and Thomas, despite recovering from a car accident (!) and weakened by the illness, was immersed in working on the English

translation of *Det Umistelige*. I sent him the last email on 10 October, sharing my impressions from Judith Bovensiepen's lecture about fossil fuel extraction in Timor-Leste. The extraction is enthusiastically supported by the key figures of former local resistance against Indonesian occupation, and becomes thus part of their fight for independence and freedom to choose their own future. I was looking forward to his brilliant analysis and examples he would use to show me similarities with other cases but also to point out the differences. I received an automatic reply: "Dear correspondent, I am currently in hospital. I will get back to you when I recover. Yours, Thomas Hylland Eriksen."

The experience of time that slows down turned into the experience of death. It was not unexpected but it still hurts. I am, however, happy for everything I and all the others got, for all the texts we can return to, and for all my memories of the legend we shouldn't have lost that early. *Den umistelige*.

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