

Perennial crisis and the loss of flexibility

Thomas Hylland Eriksen

Thomas Hylland Eriksen is a professor of social anthropology at the University of Oslo. His current research explores the implications of globalization for biological and cultural diversity. His latest books in English are *The overheating conversations* (with Martina Visentin; Springer, 2023) and *the fifth*, revised edition of *Small places, large issues* (Pluto, 2023). Email: t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes. [Correction added on October 9, 2023 after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

The author wishes to thank Daniel Knight and David Henig for their excellent comments on the draft.

- Bank, L.J. 2022. *Placing the smart city*. East London: Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council.
- & N. Mkuzo 2022. Burnt edges, looted malls. In *Placing the smart city*, L.J. Bank. East London: Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council.
- Bateson, G. 1972. *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Bantam.
- Blanchette, A. 2020. *Porkopolis*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Dewan, C. 2021. *Misreading the Bengal Delta*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Eriksen, T.H. 2016. *Overheating: An anthropology of accelerated change*. London: Pluto.
- 2021. The loss of diversity in the Anthropocene: Biological and cultural dimensions. *Frontiers in Political Science* 3.
- Haraway, D. & A. Tsing 2019. Reflections on the Plantationocene (moderated by Gregg Mitman). *Edge Effects Magazine*, June.
- Hoffmeyer, J. 1998. Semiosis and biohistory: A reply. *Semiotica* 120(3/4): 455-482.
- Hornborg, A. 2007. Learning from the Tiv: Why a sustainable economy would have to be 'multicentric'. *Culture & Agriculture* 29(2): 63-69.

Crisis is not a recent discovery or invention. In ancient Greece, the term *krisis* (κρίσις) was mainly a medical term referring to a high fever. For want of antibiotics and vaccines, the crisis was a turning point with two possible outcomes: you died or you recovered.

This remains a perspective on crisis which has survived in medical parlance, as in 'critical condition'. Nietzsche famously said, with boisterous confidence, that whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. This narrative device is standard in heroic fiction, including nationalist mythologies: there are bound to be cliffhangers and situations when all hope seems to be in vain until the hero eventually emerges victoriously from the crisis, stronger than ever, ready to face new challenges.

This narrative is a fairy tale. Crises may endure indefinitely. Crisis can become the expected condition, as climate-change-related events continually remind us, from unprecedented flooding in Auckland to extreme heatwaves in British Columbia and deadly droughts in the Iraqi delta, often referred to as 'the cradle of civilization'. As Vigh (2008) shows concerning Guinea Bissau, the concept is not necessarily meaningful for people whose lives are perpetually unstable and who constantly live in a state of improvisational survivalism. Yet, from the control towers of the modern world, uncertainty and unplanned change are seen as signs of weakness. Presenting the 2022 Human Development Report, Steiner, the director of the UNDP, was uncharacteristically pessimistic:

Layers of uncertainty are stacking up and interacting to unsettle our lives in unprecedented ways. People have faced diseases, wars and environmental disruptions before. But the confluence of destabilizing planetary pressures with growing inequalities, sweeping societal transformations to ease those pressures and widespread polarization present new, complex, interacting sources of uncertainty for the world and everyone in it. (UNDP 2022)

In the *Financial Times* at the same time, Tooze (2022) suggested the term *polycrisis* as a keyword to read the uncharted territory we have entered. This term, borrowed from the ecological thinker Edgar Morin (Morin & Kern 1999), suggests an intrinsic relationship connecting the crises currently affecting much of humanity. The co-presence of a series of interrelated crises not only entails destabilization at the societal level but also lends credibility to Knight's analytical use of the term *vertigo* in describing responses to the seemingly never-ending crisis in early 21st-century Greece (Knight 2021).

Climate change exacerbates social inequality and is itself caused by runaway global capitalism, which has accelerated since the end of the Cold War (Eriksen 2016): draining wetlands; replacing forests with fields, and fields with infrastructure on a foundation of concrete; driving ecosystems into oblivion, species to the brink of extinction and people into informal urban settlements following the logic of accumulation by dispossession. The environment is standardized and simplified, making the neologism *Plantationocene* an apt characterization of the world of global capitalism (Haraway & Tsing 2019).

The benefits of homogenization are gauged by the universal standards of modernity, which have delivered economic growth, improved access to education, reduced child mortality, improved sanitation, and so on (Rosling et al. 2017). Not everybody benefits, however, and some are faced with the bill without the chance to reap the rewards. Ultimately, everybody loses because future options are nar-

rowed, and we collectively paint ourselves into a corner. The most significant loss, seen from a long-term global perspective, is that of flexibility, defined by Bateson (1972) as the *uncommitted potential for change*. The insistence on a single economic system presupposing eternal growth, a few highly productive food crops and the destructive and potentially catastrophic reliance on fossil fuels leads to a game with high stakes that cannot be won in the long term.

21st-century contradictions of capitalism

Rapid transformations impact social life in many ways, ranging from foreign direct investments and the number of internet connections to global energy use, urbanization in the Global South and increased migration rates. They have, in some respects, visibly stepped up their pace since the 1990s. Measurable economic growth has been exceptional during these decades, and world trade has grown by 4,000 per cent since 1950 and has quadrupled since only 1990 (WTO 2021). As recent dramatic climate events show, the economy of fossil fuels, which brought growth and prosperity for 200 years, has run its course and has long led the road towards disaster for planetary ecology.

Endless growth is theoretically impossible. Jeremy Grantham performed a thought experiment demonstrating its absurdity (Eriksen 2016). Let us assume, he said, that the Egyptians possessed just one cubic metre of stuff in the year 3000 BCE. With a growth rate of 4.5 per cent, their possessions would fill 2.5 billion billion solar systems by the end of the Egyptian era 3,000 years later. Yet the dogmatic adherence to growth continues, and in just 15 years, from 2004 to 2019, the number of flight tickets sold soared from 2 to 4.5 billion.

In the last 50 years, we have removed half of the wild animals in the world. By 2020, just 4 per cent of mammals were wild, 36 per cent were humans and the remaining 60 per cent were pigs and cattle. Seventy per cent of the birds in the world are poultry, raised, genetically simplified and eaten by humans. At the same time, the habitats of the remaining wild animals are dwindling. Just as humans have fallen victim to accumulation by dispossession through land grabbing (Wilhite & Salinas 2019), they are chased off their land and come into closer contact with humans than before, opening possibilities for new, devastating virus pandemics.

Or one might consider the amount of plastic in the oceans (by 2050, it might outnumber fish), the depletion of non-renewable resources or the explosive growth of undignified informal settlements in the urban South. Many other examples could have been mentioned to show how the cumulative effects of growth reduce the range of visible options.

Although sustainable energy is increasing, so is fossil fuel consumption. As Winther and Wilhite (2015) showed, installing energy-saving heat pumps in Norwegian homes did not reduce energy consumption. Instead, the energy saved was used to heat rooms previously cold and sometimes to extend the heating period into the warmer months.

Such rebound effects are a likely outcome of the underlying growth imperative. First described in economics by William Jevons (1835-1882), the rebound argument is that increased energy efficiency reduces energy costs and increases overall energy use. So far, Jevons has been mostly correct.

The central contradiction of our century is to be drawn not between labour and capital but between economic expansion and planetary health. Overheating entails acceleration, upscaling and standardization and removes

- Ingold, T. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Keller, K. 2023. Mussels and megaprojects: Landscape structure and structural inequality in Jakarta. *Social Anthropology*. In press.
- Knight, D. 2021. *Vertiginous life: An anthropology of time and the unforeseen*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Krause, F. 2021. Economy, identity and hydrology: Toward a holistic approach to intersecting volatilities in the Mackenzie Delta, Canada. In *Delta life: Exploring dynamic environments where rivers meet the sea* (eds) F. Krause & M. Harris. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. 2021 [1962]. *Wild thought* (trans. J. Mehlman & J. Leavitt). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Morin, E. & A.B. Kern 1999. *Homeland Earth: A manifesto for the new millennium*. Cresskill Hampton Press.
- Mukherjee, J.K. et al. 2023. Beyond (un)stable: Chars as dynamic destabilisers of problematic binaries. *Social Anthropology*. In press.
- Rosling, H. et al. 2017. *Factfulness: Ten reasons we're wrong about the world – and why things are better than you think*. London: Sceptre.
- Schoones, I. 2023. Confronting uncertainties in pastoral areas: Transforming development from control to care. *Social Anthropology*. In press.
- Strang, V. 2023. The hard way: Volatility and stability in the Brisbane River Delta. *Social Anthropology*. In press.
- Swilling, M. 2021. Zumite Sedition and the emerging 'politics of the mall'. *Daily Maverick*, 21 July.
- Tooze, A. 2022. Welcome to the world of the polycrisis. *Financial Times*, 28 October.
- Tsing, A. (for the Matusutake Worlds Research Group) 2009. Beyond economic and ecological standardisation. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 20(3): 347–368.
- UNDP 2022. Multiple crises halt progress as 9 out of 10 countries fall backwards in human development, UNDP report warns. <https://tinyurl.com/UNDPkzk>.
- Vigh, H. 2008. Crisis and chronicity: Anthropological perspectives on continuous conflict and decline. *Ethnos* 73(1): 5–24.
- Wilhite, H. & C. Salinas 2019. Expansive capitalism, climate change and global climate mitigation regimes. In *Climate, capitalism and communities* (eds) A.B. Stensrud & T.H. Eriksen. London: Pluto Press.
- Winther, T. & H. Wilhite 2015. An analysis of the household energy rebound effect from a practice perspective. *Energy Efficiency* 8: 595–607.
- WTO (World Trade Organization). 2021. Evolution of trade under the WTO: Handy statistics. <https://tinyurl.com/2021wto>, accessed 15 February 2022.
- options and alternatives that might offer escape routes from the current polycrisis.
- Flexibility, volatility: The anthropological gaze**
- In the Batesonian sense, flexibility denotes variation and the possibility of doing things differently. In anthropological research, the concept can be applied to local skills and knowledge transmitted and applied in a specific context and that do not easily travel (see Ingold 2013).
- Much recent anthropological research has exemplified flexibility loss at a time of runaway, overheated global capitalism, from Blanchette's ethnography of industrial pork production in the American Midwest (Blanchette 2020) to Dewan's demonstration of the shortcomings of centralized attempts at flood mitigation in Bangladesh (Dewan 2021); from Krause's work on First Nations efforts to keep options open in the Canadian Mackenzie Delta (Krause 2021) to Strang's comparison of recent engineering, dredging and suburban housing construction on the banks of the flood-prone Brisbane River with the older, diverse and unintrusive traditional Aboriginal ways of dealing with the seasonal and sometimes erratic waxing and waning of its waters (Strang 2023).
- In a study of an urban environment that she viewed through the multifarious relationship between humans and green mussels, Keller (2023) shows how attempts to mitigate catastrophic effects of human interventions rely on knowledge of the same kind that created the problem initially. The city is Jakarta, which is subsiding because the low mudflats on which it is built are unsuitable for skyscrapers: 'Just west of the mussel berms is a section of seawall, a concrete structure 4.8 meters high and 2 meters thick. Eventually it will enclose the entire coastline, meant to protect sinking Jakarta from the sea' (Keller 2023). Fishermen and other coastal dwellers, including mussels, despair.
- Similarly, Mukherjee et al. (2023) show how the Bangladeshi delta islands of silt and sand called chars, inhabited by people who make their living there temporarily, challenge 'notions of people as essentially sedentary and land as permanent, and disrupt the view of land and water as fundamentally separate'. Thus it is only under specific regimes of knowledge and control that volatility is brought into existence and becomes a problem to be dealt with through engineering and planning. A lack of holistic thinking can be found wherever the technocratic knowledge regime predominates: for example, in Norwegian salmon farms. Since the genetic diversity among farmed salmon is much less than in wild salmon from the same areas, one result of the inevitable leakage of escaped salmon from the pens is a reduction in flexibility and resilience among wild salmon.
- Before ambitious efforts to contain nature's vagaries became dominant, variation was more significant and options more available almost everywhere. From many years of research on pastoralists in semi-arid areas, Schoones (2023) describes a broad range of engagements with the environment based on generations of accumulated experience, enabling pastoral nomads to get by during periods of drought or flooding, cold or hot spells. Encroachment by the state and land developers is a continual threat to this flexibility and the skills and knowledge on which it is based.
- Flexibility loss is often a result of infrastructural development, affecting both the natural world and the lifeworlds of humans by restricting their options. In an assessment of the 'smart city' in South Africa, Bank argues, citing Swilling (2021), that
- the trajectory of the consumerist expansion into the suburban space has been staggering. In 1970, the total volume of retail space in South Africa stood at around 27,000 square metres. By 2002, eight years after democracy, it had ballooned to more than 5 million square metres and had reached more than 18.5 million square metres by 2019. (Bank & Mkuzo 2022: 55)
- Over the same period, the large retailers established an increasingly dominant hold over the consumer market, their proportion of sales increasing from 10 per cent in 1992 to 75 per cent by 2017 as part of the socio-economic process of 'mallification' (Bank 2022: 61).
- Real estate similarly contributes to flexibility loss. In Mauritius, agricultural fields have been replaced by various kinds of infrastructure in the name of progress and prosperity. Although sugar monoculture is far from a recipe for ecological flexibility, its replacement by housing complexes, car parks, shopping centres, schools and hospitals, removing nearly all non-human vertebrates bar rats and bats, has increased the risk of flooding catastrophes. On 28 January 2023, torrential rain led to a lockdown across the island. Much of the water had nowhere to go, leading to far more damage than would have been the case a generation ago, before the mushrooming of malls, highways and housing complexes. The shallow lake temporarily replacing our garden was gone the next day, but the car park next door remained inundated. The rigidity of concrete had replaced the flexibility of soil. In one of the fastest-growing resort villages, Flic-en-Flac on the southwest coast, large-scale construction of holiday flats for foreigners and second homes for Mauritians has taken place on drained wetlands, making them vulnerable to severe damage during heavy rains.
- As mentioned, crisis only applies when control and predictability are the established norm. Similarly, no local equivalent to 'volatile' is commonly used among people who live in areas designated by engineers, governments and real estate developers as 'volatile'.
- Volatility originates from the Latin *volātilis* (fleeting, transitory). At the same time, the Greek word *krisis* recalls another Greek word, namely *ὑβρις* – hubris – which referred to arrogant humans who stupidly defied the gods and lost. In the present context, it would refer to human cultures unable or unwilling to join the tapestry consisting of all that lives, has ever lived and ever will live, thereby separating their own short-term, limited projects from the greater good. The foundational hubris myth is the story of Icarus, intoxicated by his ability to fly, who fell to his death from the sky when the sun melted the wax that his father, Daedalus, used to attach his wings to his back. The current unsustainable growth economy is now looking its downfall in the eye. Some of the present crises – the cost of living, housing shortages and wars – will end, while others have led us to the brink of self-annihilation. As noted by Strang (2023): 'Development language is riddled with terms that reveal a desire for control: "risk management", "security", "reliability".'
- At a time when it is common in the global middle and upper classes to celebrate the alleged advances made in the realm of freedom, it is necessary to show that the space enabling alternatives and options to unfold – an alternative view of freedom – has shrunk in the same post-war period. Untempered by human obligations, human rights have encouraged a reduction in the number of options available to future generations who are inheriting a damaged planet and a world society relying on the logic of homogenization, standardization and simplification. As ecosystems are locked into a plantation logic, so is local knowledge sacrificed on the altar of universal modernity. Since engineering knowledge – as opposed to 'wild thought' in Lévi-Straussian parlance (Lévi-Strauss 2021 [1962]) – builds on universal standards making everything comparable with everything else, it is inherently reductionist. In contrast, local knowledge and skills are non-scalable and diverse. An economy based on 'wild thought' is multicentric, whereas universal comparability and unicentrism pre-

Fig. 1. Volatile climate:
Flooding in Mauritian garden, January 2023.

Fig. 2. An image of progress or a recipe for crisis? Gas pipelines being laid out in Queensland.

Fig. 3. Crisis or a new form of volatility? Changing seasonality in the Mackenzie Delta, Canada.

Fig. 4. When is the natural volatility of the shifting islands of the Bengal Delta redefined as a crisis?



THOMASHYLLAND ERIKSEN



THOMASHYLLAND ERIKSEN



FRANZ KRAUSE



PRITWINATH GHOSH

dominate in the less sustainable economy of capitalism (Hornborg 2007). The former offers many options, the latter only one.

Volatility, flexibility: A loss of semiotic freedom

According to the modern constitution, instability and unpredictability indicate a crisis since human control is defined as the norm. Following this logic, a volatile environment is one prone to crisis. However, as my brief examples show, volatility is in the eye of the beholder, and many people who live under conditions of uncertainty are used to improvising, seeing the lack of control as standard. There is flexibility and a creative exertion of human freedom in the shifting settlements of char inhabitants in Bangladesh, the changing strategies of pastoralists in Southern Africa and the adaptability of First Nations in the Mackenzie Delta to sudden changes in their surroundings. These options are lost, leading to local crises, typically as a direct outcome of orchestrated efforts to reduce volatility and prevent crisis, and this is a primary reason why it is meaningful to speak of a *global polycrisis* rooted in the destructive, standardizing and homogenizing growth economies dominating most of the human and non-human world. The loss of flexibility is evident and can be described more accurately by invoking *semiotic freedom* as a scarce resource.

The concept of semiotic freedom is central to the thought of the pioneering biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer (1943-2019). Biosemiotics is a methodology for studying living systems through acts and webs of communication and an epistemology enabling a transcendence of dangerous dichotomies such as the artificial nature-culture barrier. Hoffmeyer (1998) once said that if he were to summarize the entire history of evolution in a sentence, he would say that it has, over millions of years, led to an overall growth in semiotic freedom.

All organisms have a degree of semiotic freedom: that is, an ability to respond to their environment in at least two distinct ways. Hoffmeyer describes an evolutionary movement towards more complexity, more communication, more relationships and a denser forest of signs enabling organisms to exchange an ever-growing number of messages.

The concept of semiotic freedom confirms the relevance of the term *Anthropocene* since humans have greater semiotic freedom than any other species. The abuse of this freedom is about to transform the capitalist growth world into a huge Icarus on his way towards the ground, belatedly discovering the melting wax – but our superior semiotic freedom also enables us to change course given the sufficient will to do so.

In the 2020s, Hoffmeyer's *longue durée* description of a world where semiotic freedom is increasing seems a rosy picture rapidly being inverted owing to the human simplification of the semiosphere, which now takes place at a global scale (Eriksen 2021; see also Tsing 2009). We are currently experiencing not a growth but an overall reduction in semiotic freedom. Applied to the standardization and destruction that accompany capitalism, biosemiotics can be mobilized as an indispensable tool of global analysis and an ally for anthropologists, green activists, Indigenous groups and all kinds of local communities overrun by overheated globalization in a fundamental critique of the homogenizing and destructive effects of global capitalism, demonstrating, rather than merely positing, the superiority of local knowledge and the necessity of defending diversity in every domain.

Vigh's (2008) descriptions of life amidst the chronic crisis in Bissau show the importance of flexibility in dealing with unpredictability. The doctrine of TINA (There Is No Alternative) needs to be replaced by one of TAMA (There Are Many Alternatives), and anthropologists ought to lead the way. ●