



# Questioning the *Cosmopolitan*

## *Ulf Hannerz about the internally quite diverse*

Ulf Hannerz is a Swedish professor and one of the leading anthropologists worldwide. He sees culture as something being constantly in motion – this is fitting very well with the dynamic image of a world shaped by the ongoing excitement for globalization and interconnectedness. From this point of view, culture and meaning may become durable in the sense of „cultural invention“. Today's Cultural Anthropology has moved on from what is used to be in its beginnings. As a voice for a new generation of anthropologists, Ulf Hannerz has focused on concepts like *creolization*, *cultural flows*, *cosmopolitans* or *organization of diversity* and therefore also provided useful tools for thinking about the increasingly popular term of „culture“. His work provides an account of culture in an ever more globalizing world.

We met him in autumn 2007 in Vienna at the IFK (Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften). The following interview aims to provide a summary of some of our main discussion points.

*How did your interest for KSA start?*

Like many people I came to anthropology without intending to stay in it forever. I had this interest in Africa. This was in the 1960s and Africa was becoming independent, one state after another. That was exciting but I really intended to go into zoology and decided just to take one course in what was called „ethnography“. I found that interesting – so I remained there. Ethnography was then a very small subject in Sweden, so I did what there was to do for an undergraduate, but since I was becoming more serious about it, I went on to an American university for a year. That broadened my new knowledge on what anthropology was really about. What I had studied in Stockholm was very old-fashioned. Then a little later I was invited to come and do research with a socio-linguistic project in Washington DC. The project was studying Black American dialect, and I provided ethnographic background information.

*Can you tell us more about your interest in West African culture?*

I did eventually go to West Africa, in the 1970s and 1980s, and did field work in a Nigerian town. That actually took me to my interest in globalization, and creolization, but that is another story. In the American context, there was this question to what extent Black Americans actually have anything West African in their culture, which has survived the slave trade and slavery and the incorporation into American life. That has been a controversial issue: are Black people just like any other Americans or do they really have a separate culture? I still feel that most Black Americans have never really become fully integrated and assimilated into American society. So there has been a degree of autonomy to maintain and develop some culture of their own. I think recently there has probably more readiness to acknowledge a certain distinctiveness in the black tradition.

*What do you mean by this distinctiveness?*

My most obvious example would be in Black American music which has always maintained a certain autonomy. Black culture is also about storytelling, the emphasis on speaking. That's something that has been cultivated for generations. It is about telling a story well or winning in an argument: the mastery of words. But also I think of one figure which exists in West African culture and which I think somehow

survived not only in Black America but also in the Caribbean. This is a trickster figure, who seems politically and physically weak but who is smart and can win conflicts by outwitting the opponents and doing this by being rather unpredictable and perhaps not always a fully respectable being. And I think you find this in some black political figures also, at least at the local level.

*So what do you think about the presidential candidate Barack Obama in this context?*

I don't really think Obama belongs to this, because actually he does not come out of the African American tradition. His mother is a White American, his father was from Kenya, but during his early life Obama seems to have had little to do with Black America. His mother remarried someone from Indonesia, and Barack spent some years growing up there. Only when he became an adult he did turn into a community organizer in Black American neighbourhoods. I think he is a very interesting phenomenon for various reasons, but I think he's a phenomenon on his own, really a *cosmopolitan* figure rather than a Black American figure.

*Is an anthropologist automatically a cosmopolitan?*

No (*laughs*). I think there is a certain potential in anthropology and it may draw people who have a cosmopolitan intention. Of course, one can do what's called anthropology at home, you don't necessarily go abroad. But even among colleagues who do go abroad in a conventional anthropological way to do fieldwork in one foreign country, you find that this may be the only place elsewhere in the world they become interested in. So they become locals of two places, but it does not necessarily mean that they are interested in lots of things in the entire wider world. Maybe a small step towards cosmopolitanism, but not quite.

*You live in Vienna now, doing a project called „The Geocultural Imagination: Scenarios and Story Lines“. What is it about?*

It's something which I've been thinking about close to fifteen years. We have had in recent years a number of what I call *world scenarios* beginning with an American political scientist named Fukuyama, asking whether we have now reached *The End of History*, as liberal democracy seemed to have triumphed once and for all. Then there was Samuel Huntington with his 'Clash of Civilizations theory'. He said that now that the Cold War is over, it's also the end of the battle between ideologies. So according to Huntington, there is the conflict of civilizations instead. I think many of these scenarios were the product of the end of the Cold War. Much of this genre of writing is about how politics relates to the geography of culture in the world. My particular interest

in this genre is how do their statements and assumptions about culture match with what anthropologists nowadays think about culture – frequently not very well, really. Some of it is a very rhetorical use of culture to suggest that things are very strong, very widespread, very old and thick. When anthropologists, not least including myself, think of culture much more in processual terms and something that's changeable and internally quite diverse it doesn't fit well with the assumptions of Huntington and such people.

*Can you please try to sum up your concept of culture?*

In my book *Cultural Complexity* I pushed the idea of socially organized meaning, and I still tend to stick to it. My main point of departure would be that compared to other animals, human beings depend very much on continuous learning in all phases of life. We need to draw from ideas, skills, and all kinds of knowledge that are available in our social environment. It's the old nature-culture-divide again, which is always tricky. I mean you have a renewal of this debate because after all human biology certainly makes progress, and so we have to be prepared to think again about the details of that divide.

*Have you also used the term „software“ in this context?*

I've done it, but there are complications with this metaphor. On the whole it is useful to think of biology as „hardware“ and culture as „software“. But still – it's very important to know when to leave aside this metaphor. There is sometimes this unfortunate tendency to think that culture is so determining that once you have learned something you can't get away from it. That you're becoming a kind of robot under whatever culture gets to you first. And then it would become much like what is biologically and genetically determined. With culture you can learn certain things but you can also learn other things and you may reject what you learned before. Culture is negotiable and changeable over time. We need to understand socialisation and resocialisation, the way that culture is continuously under negotiation. In the 1960s, Anthony Wallace wrote about the „Organization of Diversity“, a marvellous formulation. The complex society involves people knowing and doing different things, and still fitting into some sort of organization.

*Let's switch to the topic of individuality and the construction of identity...*

Sometimes when we talk about identities we have in mind collective identities, and sometimes personal, individual identities. Much talk about identity politics would involve collective identities in some sort: how do you belong to categories or group shared identities, to an ethnic group, or generation, or gender? But also you have a personal identity which may be entirely unique. With

this kind of organization of diversity, it is very likely that a larger proportion of things end up being quite individualized, at least in the collection of things put together.

With globalization you have a certain rhetoric saying that people are becoming very similar all over the world. But at the same time, when people have so much more culture to pick from (literature, food, music), there is also a greater opportunity to put together an absolutely unique setup of knowledge and preferences, and in the end also identities. At one level I think that globalization can also contribute to individuation. Again, I think of Barack Obama as an example.

*How far is cultural homogenization happening?*

Homogenization has been very much tied to the market. The standard examples have become clichés like McDonalds, Starbucks, Ikea and Coca Cola – cultural commodities which are everywhere. They try to identify tastes that can be sold everywhere. But then the market will also be segmented. Consumers aren't in fact going to be alike – they all have been socialized into different directions. So you can also find market niches which allow a lot of diversity. Undeniably homogenization has a certain impact, and the market is important. Then sometimes it is said that nation-states try to preserve their heritages, so they are forces against homogenization at the world level. But one should not forget that state machineries are likewise pushing similar things in many places – the idea of citizenship, for example, or universal primary education. States have these culture producing machineries which also lead in the direction of homogenization. I think since World War II the whole United Nations machinery provides an apparatus for spreading certain values, the Human Rights Declaration, for example. On the other hand, local, regional, and national traditions are still very strong and not entirely reachable for the market and for the state machineries. Theorizing the strength of everyday life in maintaining cultural diversity is very important.

*Are there existing universal values?*

A very good question. Probably, but then they may also contradict each other. Since values are in practice so much linked to context, I am afraid trying to state them generally, out of particular contexts, leads to a rather unrealistic understanding of human life. For example, I would think that „survival“ is probably a very basic human value. But then we have the exception of suicide bombers. How can anybody become one? We are getting a sizeable literature on this now. But still, basically I

would suppose that survival is pretty much a universal value.

*In context of the suicide bomber – Is rage a universal topic?*

Rage is a universal human sentiment that at times any human being can probably feel.

Anthropology had this research genre of looking at feelings and sentiments. And trying to determine to what extent they are also culturally shaped. I haven't followed that discussion so closely. I would think that it's partly a matter of talking about emotions in different ways. Cultures have their vocabularies for such talk. I would believe human beings have certain sets of emotions which are biologically given but culturally handled.

*Should anthropologists take up more topics of emotions?*

Anthropologists are inclined to explore the cultural dimensions of just about anything. And emotions would tend to be one of these things. People may believe that emotions are beyond culture, a kind of rough biology – well, I think there is an interaction between nature and culture. Gender may come in here. There may be differences between the genders and also diversity within them. I think that's very important to realize. Although I would suspect some biological base to this – however always intermingled with culture. The tendency to say that women do this and men do that – this is much too simple, because of the internal variations.

*In how far should scholars value the debates over controversial practices?*

One major value should be always being critical in the sense of also trying to see the weak points in one's own position. And see if it really holds up. And that may be a rather difficult value to take into politics. If you decide to push one thing you are inclined to go for the strong sides and strong arguments for pushing that one thing. The balance between scholarship and politics is likely to be pretty tricky much of the time. It depends on what you mean by „politics“.

*Should anthropologists give advice to politicians? What about topics like female genital mutilation?*

My main principle in a lot of cases is: let the people decide. Let individuals themselves decide. In practice it still gets rather complicated. When it comes to practice like FGM or honour killings they tend to occur in situations where women have been the ones with less power and men have had more power – or where older people have more power than younger people. I think one problem with speaking about things like this in cultural



terms is that culture is understood to involve some sort of consensus. You may say, well, FGM is part of their culture – which suggests that they have agreed on this. I have my doubts. Because I frequently think that culture is involved in a power equation, where whatever has been established as a cultural practice may be based on that power equation. If you change the power equation, are you really going to find all the people – men, women, young, old – still wanting to stick to these customs?

*Is there a (political) overregulation in many things?*

I would think on the whole yes. Sometimes cultural diversity may do better without multiculturalism. In a sense multiculturalism tends to involve political and administrative decisions. That's the way the term multiculturalism has become established. It becomes a tool of the organizations and the state for taking collective decisions or administrative decisions rather than leaving decisions to the individuals. And I think once you made multiculturalism a kind of administrative and political concept you end up with something that's more large scale and more static than I think culture really should be. It's in the logic of the state or the municipality to need very stable, well-bounded categories of people. People should have the right to say „on this point I don't really belong to this group“. The logic of state or collective multiculturalism to me seems to go against spontaneous natural cultural process, where people do learn and relearn and change their minds. I think people should be entitled to do that.

*How would you define the role of the media within anthropological work?*

I always have been sort of fairly intensive media consumer in terms of reading newspapers and magazines as well as listening to the radio and watching television. For me personally media play a major part in my life. Individuation in context of globalization of course has a lot to do with the media. We can now consume media from such a great variety of sources and that may be quite important to who we are.

When I started doing fieldwork as an anthropologist in Washington in the black neighbourhood in the 1960s, I found myself sitting there, watching television and it worried me because in the classic anthropological texts I had read you don't find any media. So what am I doing here watching television – just wasting my time? But then I realized that the media were an integral part in everyday life. Not only television but also the black radio stations, which were central institutions to Black community life. So I felt since then that if ethnography does not take media into account it may have a lack in credibility. It took quite a long time for sociology and anthropology to really incorporate media into both

method and theory, which is one reason why cultural studies developed as a field itself.

*What do think about the phenomenon of blogging?*

I don't have a blog, and I haven't really gotten around looking at blogs very regularly, partly as a matter of habit, partly as a matter of time. I do think they are interesting phenomena, but there may be getting to be too many of them. Does it become a kind of narcissism to have one's own blog without anybody paying much attention, as a new form of self expression? But then, as I understand, some blogs are getting a lot of viewers. So in the American politics in the election year it seems like they can really make some difference in mobilizing opinion and in being dangerous for candidates who can also get destroyed by negative blogging.

*How do you see anthropology today?*

Anthropology has a lot of diversity inside itself, and I like that. I think it's also important that people outside the university, in politics or wherever, have a reasonable understanding of what anthropologists do. And I think that's a problem because there's a conception that anthropologists are mostly antiquarians and study backwards, study the past, study what's disappearing. I'm interested in these world scenarios we talked about before because they are future oriented, ways of trying to tell people what the world may be becoming. One should see them not as predictions, but as arguments about possibilities and risks. And I think anthropology can contribute here, because its methods, not least ethnography, should be good for identifying what are emergent tendencies in the present.

*What kind of new initiatives would you hope the next generation of anthropologists would launch?*

I hope they will continue to do a lot of different things, but also I hope they will perhaps be a bit more effective in bringing it to the ear and eye of a wider public than anthropologists have been doing. I think it's dangerous to write in a style which is only for other researchers. We probably need to experiment with styles of writing and other communications. „Die Maske“ fits precisely into that, but also in writing books we should try to put anthropological ideas across in more different ways.

There is now much more anthropological film making than there used to be. That is also good, but I tend to be a writing person, so I think that other kinds of writings are as important. With the globalization in the sense of global interconnectedness, cultural and otherwise, that should open up possibilities. Ordinary people may become more concerned with the rest of the world. That should provide openings for anthropologists to make their work interesting for a broader audience. ■