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## Ulf Hannerz

### Interviewed by Dominic Boyer

**Dominic Boyer (DB):** More so than most of us, Ulf, you are truly an “anthropologist of the world.” And it so happens that these are very challenging times, but also in some ways very inspiring times, for the world. The Washington Consensus, for example, seems more fragile than ever before, and an anthropologist is set to lead the World Bank for the first time. Yet austerity reigns, and the eurozone is in turmoil. Latin America is blossoming with new social and political experiments. Yet the United States seems in the grip of a slow and possibly very ugly decline. I wanted to ask you to reflect on anthropology’s role in today’s world. Or, not to be so parochial, what the ethnographic and conceptual work of transnationally oriented human scientists (forgive the German conceit!) could contribute to the navigation of times like these. Is this a good time to resurrect the 1980s image of anthropology as cultural critique, for example?

**Ulf Hannerz (UH):** I will certainly follow the activities of the World Bank with renewed interest (although the alternative, which would have been a Nigerian woman economist heading it, would have been appealing as well).

I think “cultural critique” remains one of the uses of anthropology—and, of course, although it was revived in the 1980s, it goes way back, to Margaret Mead and Bronislaw Malinowski. But overall, I would want to see more experimentation with diverse styles and genres in anthropological writing—particularly in reaching out to audiences outside the discipline, in or outside academia. At present, anthropologists, not least in the United States, seem to be writing almost entirely for each other. It is striking that a number of historians seem to do so much better in writing for wider readerships—I am thinking of people like Timothy Garton Ash, Simon Schama, the late Tony Judt, or Niall Ferguson (whatever one may think of some of the latter’s political stances). But, then, it is also notable that these are all British immigrants, or commuters, to the American academic scene.

Thank you for describing me as an “anthropologist of the world.” I really do

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1 think that anthropology as a truly worldwide discipline in its research interests  
2 has a particular public role. I just read Amin Maalouf's *Disordered World*, a book  
3 on various troubles now facing humanity—Maalouf is a Lebanese writer, long  
4 in the Paris diaspora, so the book has an emphasis on the changing Arab world.  
5 Anyway, he sees coping with cultural differences as perhaps *the* major challenge,  
6 globally and locally, and suggests that if everyone were to become enduringly pas-  
7 sionate about one culture other than his or her own, the result would be “a closely  
8 woven cultural web covering the whole planet” (Maalouf 2011: 161). Now that is  
9 obviously a utopian idea, but it struck me that anthropologists with their commit-  
10 ments to widespread fields could be seen as a kind of avant-garde here. But then  
11 they have to find ways of disseminating their understandings effectively, in an  
12 information landscape which is now very different from that of the classic anthro-  
13 pology of “other cultures.” On the one hand, knowledge (or misunderstandings)  
14 can now flow through so many parallel or competing channels; on the other hand,  
15 I am afraid the result of current media saturation is often more narcissism, rather  
16 than more cosmopolitanism. Will such efforts at informing the public about the  
17 world elsewhere take the form of cultural critique? Sometimes, no doubt. But I am  
18 reminded of Marshall Sahlins's comment somewhere that we should not make it  
19 seem as if other people have constructed their lives for our purposes, in answer to  
20 the evils of Western society. This could turn into only a higher form of narcissism.

21  
22 **DB:** Ulf, let's talk a bit more about reaching out to wider audiences through our  
23 writing. Two questions come immediately to mind given your career: the first is  
24 whether you feel there are particular experimental lessons to be learned from  
25 Scandinavian anthropology, where, perhaps especially in Norway and Sweden,  
26 anthropology has shown a remarkable capacity to participate in public debate.  
27 The second question is what, if anything, you think we can learn from news jour-  
28 nalist today about communicating our forms of expertise to wider publics. One  
29 tends to hear lamentation that news media are not more interested in what we have  
30 to say or in how we say it. But, of course, this way of thinking amounts at some  
31 point to its own alibi.

32  
33 **UH:** I think our Norwegian colleagues have been particularly successful here,  
34 but to what extent there are “experimental lessons” I am not quite sure. In part I  
35 think they have simply tried harder. One of them had a regular newspaper column  
36 for quite some time, in the 1970s and 1980s or so, and then in the next generation  
37 there were several who took an interest in reaching a wider public and who may  
38 also have stimulated each other. This has been true not only of anthropologists;

1 I think a number of other Norwegian social scientists have been noticeable as  
2 public commentators as well.

3 Now, for one thing, one should note that even these anthropologists have in  
4 large part offered views on Norwegian affairs, not so much on matters relating to  
5 other countries or cultures (although immigration and minority issues have been  
6 an important theme). But I think one should also keep in mind that in terms of  
7 population size, the Scandinavian countries are all rather small. So I believe there  
8 is a kind of familiarity, accessibility, transparency that helps. Journalists have  
9 some sense of who is who in academia and vice versa. It is far from perfect, but  
10 scholars who want to cultivate media contacts have a better chance to do so.

11 There is another factor which I think I should emphasize. These are coun-  
12 tries with strong national languages, which are weak internationally. My friend  
13 Abram de Swaan, a Dutch sociologist, has described the “world language system”  
14 as one of three tiers: English, now far above anything else; then languages like  
15 French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Chinese, and a few others; then the third tier  
16 of languages which have few people using them as a second language. That obvi-  
17 ously is where Scandinavian languages (as well as Dutch and a great many oth-  
18 ers) belong. This means that Scandinavian academics who want to participate in  
19 international academic life must write in a foreign language, most likely English,  
20 and some get very good at this. The other side of the coin may be that they can  
21 then become fairly invisible at home, among audiences who do not habitually  
22 read English and do not see those publications, in foreign journals or from foreign  
23 publishing houses, anyway. That may not worry these scholars—but if they care  
24 to reach home audiences, writing in the national language may become more of  
25 a conscious choice where one knows that one is very likely writing for another  
26 audience, outside the discipline, perhaps outside academic life altogether. I think  
27 there is a kind of informal division of labor here. Some people are more focused  
28 on their more or less global community of colleagues; others are more intent on  
29 contributing to public knowledge at home.

30 But then I see a current complication. Academic institutions, and politicians  
31 of higher education, in Europe and various other regions, now seem much more  
32 obsessed with streamlined research assessment exercises, publication rankings—  
33 what is sometimes referred to as the academic “audit culture”—than I believe  
34 is yet the case in the more pluralistic American academic world. I think it is in  
35 large part a matter of these institutions being state institutions, so you can impose  
36 rules on them very effectively from the top. And the way these measurements  
37 work, you climb in the rankings with articles in what are considered the leading  
38 international journals, which will be mostly in English (and published or at least

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1 distributed by a handful of commercial publishing houses, but that is to a degree  
2 another matter). The ranking procedure obviously in large part has its origins in  
3 the natural sciences and medicine, so not much thought is given to the built-in log-  
4 ics of different disciplines, especially those in the humanities and social sciences.  
5 This means that books are undervalued, and so are writings in other languages,  
6 for other audiences. There is, for one thing, a contradiction here. At least our Scan-  
7 dinavian national academic systems tend officially to celebrate the “three tasks”  
8 of universities: research, teaching, but also reaching out with [their] knowledge to  
9 the public. Now the first of these may at least seem rather easily measurable—that  
10 is, at least the assumption behind those auditing procedures. There is some pre-  
11 occupation, too, with ways of evaluating teaching quality. In contrast, there seems  
12 to be very little systematic attention to that third task: contributing to public  
13 knowledge. Unless the agents of audit culture get serious about this, the reason-  
14 able response, from university presidents all the way down to young faculty strug-  
15 gling to get tenure, will be not to bother much with that scholarly public service.  
16 So that could actually decline, and public culture would be further impoverished.  
17 I know of universities in countries with severe societal problems—no names  
18 mentioned—where some more input into public debate from the human sciences  
19 would seem desirable, but when you point this out to a university’s leadership with  
20 its eyes on global ranking lists, you may not find good listeners.

21 Forgive me for dwelling on this, but I think it is a tendency we must really  
22 be concerned with. Your second question: What, if anything, can we learn from  
23 journalists? Now there is certainly a lot of variety in journalism. Some of it is  
24 dreadful, some very good. Academics and journalists may have a kind of habitual  
25 aversion to one another; for anthropologists that aversion easily comes to focus  
26 on foreign correspondents. Forgive me again, but when I engaged in a research  
27 project on the work of foreign correspondents some years ago (mostly those writ-  
28 ing for print media of higher quality), I quite often found that they were doing  
29 very good work, considering the practical circumstances. And they could know  
30 much more than they had a chance to show. Especially in their feature stories, I  
31 think they were sometimes quite impressive in getting mini-ethnographies into  
32 one thousand words or so, in ways that could attract readers. So if we want to reach  
33 wider audiences ourselves with some of our work, I think we may do well to read  
34 at least some foreign correspondents, and some other investigative reporters, with  
35 some care. Not least would I think we should try to develop a sense of the “big  
36 picture,” if we can credibly find one. Ethnographers still tend to handle miniatures  
37 well, but techniques of zooming may be a bit neglected.  
38

1 **DB:** I'd like to come back to the issue of audit culture in a moment. But while we're  
2 on the subject of publics and publicity (again in the German sense of *Öffentlich-*  
3 *keit*), do you see conditions changing, or new opportunities opening, with new  
4 media and social media? For example, there are now probably hundreds of  
5 anthropologists engaged in blogging of some form, and this format could be one  
6 way of offering the thousand-word mini-ethnographies that you just mentioned.  
7 On the other hand, blogs like other new and social media tend to operate through  
8 networks rather than address broad (anonymous) publics in the traditional sense.  
9 Another example: I enjoy Keith Hart's Facebook posts, and he seems to take this  
10 work very seriously. But again, he may be posting only to an immediate audience  
11 of a few hundred people, many of whom already belong to his professional net-  
12 works. But that's rather symptomatic of our media environment today, no? The  
13 broadcast publicity that you and I grew up with is being hollowed out by these  
14 new meshes of lateral connectivity. Do we need to rethink our modes of public  
15 outreach accordingly? Or should the objective still be to write more op-ed pieces  
16 for newspapers or to find ways to get ourselves on TV?

17  
18 **UH:** Perhaps we should be doing all these things—perhaps the one format I am  
19 really doubtful about is the kind of TV talk show where the entire idea seems to  
20 be to get people to shout at each other. But I do not think I am really technologi-  
21 cally up-to-date on all new possibilities.

22 Keith is an old friend of mine—we first ran into each other in the Cayman  
23 Islands over forty years ago and have been in touch ever since. I think he has  
24 continued to be one of the original minds, the gadflies, of our field. But I believe it  
25 is true that his ongoing electronic networking effort is another instance of anthro-  
26 pologists talking mostly to each other. And I am afraid much blogging, in and  
27 out of anthropology, is more a matter of self-expression than of communication.

28 Now I am not sure why the *Mumbai Theatre Guide* and the *Circassian World*  
29 *Newsletter* appear regularly in my e-mail in-box. I never asked for them, and I  
30 certainly do not always, or even often, open these messages, but at least they are  
31 there, without my having to make the effort to seek them out. I think if we are  
32 really interested in contributing to public knowledge, we cannot sit and wait for  
33 audiences to come to us. I would see more potential in collaborative enterprises,  
34 regularly feeding knowledge and opinion about particular themes, rather than  
35 some undifferentiated “public anthropology,” to audiences who really define their  
36 interests in other ways than a curiosity about our discipline as such.

37 I see a need for a greater organizing effort here. In my most recent English-  
38 language book, *Anthropology's World* (2010), I devote a chapter to pointing to

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1 some “usable past” that we could still do well to think about again—contempo-  
2 rary anthropology seems to me too much inclined to amnesia. And there I devote  
3 some passages to the efforts of the “modernologist” Kon Wajiro in Japan and the  
4 Mass-Observation movement in Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Both of  
5 these basically recruited teams of amateur observers to do ethnographic observa-  
6 tions in varied contexts, on current issues. I would not suggest we would want to  
7 return precisely to this, but the fact that there are now professional anthropologists  
8 everywhere might make possible a kind of collaborative “world watch” drawing  
9 on local knowledge, continued access, and informed interpretation, which hardly  
10 any news organization could match. In early 2011, during the Arab Spring, I found  
11 in my e-mail a flow of messages organized by the lively media anthropology  
12 section of EASA, the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Some of  
13 them were from people who had been right there, on Tahrir Square and other sites.  
14 Especially if we could develop a genre of “rapid ethnography,” drawing probably  
15 on local anthropologists rather than parachutists, we might find new interested  
16 audiences.

17  
18 **DB:** I like this “collaborative world watch” idea very much and agree with you  
19 that there is an important opportunity for anthropology here parallel to the work  
20 of parachutists but also to networks of stringers. I’m deeply committed to the  
21 importance of long-form, “slow ethnography,” as well, but just because we do that  
22 doesn’t mean that we cannot also do rapid ethnography. These are different modes  
23 of writing for different venues. But to accomplish something on the scale of a  
24 collaborative world watch would require significant coordination and sponsor-  
25 ship, I think. Could this be a project for our professional associations like AAA  
26 [American Anthropological Association] and EASA? In general, I’d be interested  
27 to know how you, as a former chair of EASA and longtime participant in AAA,  
28 feel that professional associations can best contribute to the intellectual vitality of  
29 the field. Could they be doing more than they are?

30  
31 **UH:** Certainly, as with so many things, this is not an “either-or” but a “both-and”  
32 matter: trying, if we can, to do both slow and rapid ethnography. I am sure both  
33 AAA and EASA, as major regional organizations, can play a part in supporting  
34 this sort of world watch endeavor. But I think it is very important to get Afri-  
35 can, Asian, and Latin American colleagues involved as well. My friend Virginia  
36 Dominguez, a former AAA president, tells me of a new outfit that she has played  
37 a part in initiating, an *Anthropologists Without Borders*, at present with a base in  
38



**Interview:**  
**Ulf Hannerz**

1 Brazil. Perhaps that could play a part in stimulating and coordinating rapid public  
2 ethnographic reporting as well.

3

4 **DB:** You wisely caution in *Anthropology's World* that “the ideal of building intel-  
5 ligibility in the world . . . does not seem to be fully realizable as long as opportu-  
6 nities for observation, reflection and reporting remain very unevenly distributed,  
7 and unevenly controlled” (Hannerz 2010: 112). Perhaps this gets us back to the  
8 less than optimal institutional conditions under which academic and nonacademic  
9 anthropology is practiced in many parts of the world. How can one strive for the  
10 kind of global “world-building anthropology” you have in mind in a world still  
11 defined by uneven opportunities?

12

13 **UH:** That is a difficult question. Again, perhaps that new head of the World Bank  
14 can do something to support capacity building in more places, in those social  
15 sciences which are most relevant to the purposes of his institution. I do hear of  
16 scholars in the more prosperous parts of the world seeking research grants which  
17 would also cover the collaboration with local colleagues in their fields in coun-  
18 tries where there is little or no funding available. Yet there is the risk in such  
19 arrangements that the research agenda is set by the more affluent partner, and so  
20 it could become, to put it bluntly, another variety of “academic colonialism.” And  
21 in the current situation, I doubt that much funding of this kind is readily available  
22 anyway.

23 One might also hope that in some of those countries that are now rising in the  
24 world, some of the new resources can go to a broad support for research institu-  
25 tions and institutions cultivating public knowledge. That could at least diversify  
26 scholarly interests and perspectives. It is true, for one thing, that several of the  
27 BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China South Africa] countries already have strong  
28 anthropological traditions; it would be good if these could also expand to be a  
29 little less preoccupied with “anthropology at home,” to contribute more to the  
30 “closely woven cultural web” about which I quoted Amin Maalouf before—that  
31 global cross-cutting of points of view.

32 Then certainly there is also a question of what we can do perhaps on a slightly  
33 more everyday basis, on this side of more utopian schemes. This involves things  
34 like scrutinizing our reading habits—which journals do we read, where do our  
35 books come from?—and using invitations, for example, to visiting scholars and  
36 to conferences in such a way that they do not always routinely strengthen existing  
37 center-periphery structures.

38



1 **DB:** Do you also share the worry that the cosmopolitan aspirations of anthropol-  
2 ogy are being undermined by the rise of what Marilyn Strathern and others have  
3 termed “audit culture” in universities across the world? In your experience, how  
4 have “new public management”-style regimes impacted the way anthropology is  
5 practiced?  
6

7 **UH:** I would not claim to have a good overview of how all that actually works out.  
8 Audit culture has indeed spread widely, but the forms may vary. I remember that  
9 in the early 2000s, when my own department was undergoing the first Swedish  
10 assessment exercise, and I was involved in that at the ground-floor level, it all  
11 ended with a brief meeting of representatives of departments with the director  
12 general of the national universities board, and I told her that I had thought it had  
13 all turned out rather better than I had feared, after listening to the lamentations of  
14 British academic friends about their earlier experiences. And she smiled and said,  
15 “The first thing we decided was not to do it the British way.” So there have been  
16 differences between places and over time. Moreover, I would not be sure about  
17 how policies actually work their way through structures in different national and  
18 other contexts. I suspect that in some places the auditing is performed, measures  
19 are taken and reported—and then nothing happens, except that the administra-  
20 tive workload has increased. “New public management” shades into old public  
21 mismanagement.

22 But that said, to get to the specific impact on anthropology, I do not believe it is  
23 a good influence. To consider first its implications for graduate training, the im-  
24 position of standard time schedules for the completion of a doctorate, regardless of  
25 discipline, which is often part of the audit culture package, does not go well with  
26 a kind of professional cosmopolitanism which involves going to live in another  
27 country (even among those proverbial exotic Bongo-Bongo), learning a new lan-  
28 guage, and what have you. I think this is one factor—there are certainly others—  
29 which now pushes in the direction of more “anthropology at home.” Some years  
30 ago, when I was invited to examine a PhD candidate at a British university, I found  
31 that she looked strikingly young (and found that she was indeed younger than I  
32 had been when I got my doctorate—I have not been so used to that). It was a very  
33 good thesis, and she had completed it well before the deadline, but she had done  
34 her fieldwork pretty much across the street.

35 As I said before, I still think audit culture has struck more uniformly across  
36 Europe, and in some other places, than it has in the United States. But then, curi-  
37 ously, some of the decision makers in higher education do not seem very well  
38 informed about the facts of American academic life, although they find that Amer-



1        ican universities tend to rank highly on those ranking lists which they take very  
2        seriously and must therefore be taken as models. So, for one thing, they apparently  
3        often believe that those standard times for graduate degrees come from there.  
4        When, on the other hand, I ask my American friends in major departments if their  
5        students actually do their graduate training and finish their theses in four years,  
6        they all seem to shake their heads.

7        I also remember one prominent American (but British-trained) colleague,  
8        when we were at the same conference in Australia, warning local colleagues there  
9        that if their universities dutifully started turning out PhDs with only a few years'  
10       training, these young scholars would be unable to compete for academic jobs  
11       in their own country; these jobs would go to Americans coming in with better  
12       qualifications.

13       Well, what about later career stages? It is sometimes said that at least after you  
14       have tenure, or whatever is its nearest equivalent, you can afford to do the research  
15       you want, change your research interests—perhaps go to other places for research  
16       than where you have been before. But things like research assessment exercises  
17       may impose peculiar rhythms on academic work at such levels as well. I hear of  
18       pressures to get things published, by whatever journal or press, even when they  
19       might have benefited from being allowed a little more time. I doubt that extensive  
20       retooling, such as reading up on a new area, taking on another language, and other  
21       such activities, would be warmly welcomed by the captains of auditing either.

22       I certainly have no trouble with the principle that we must be accountable for  
23       the work we do, whether in teaching, research, or contributions to public knowl-  
24       edge. It is okay, too, if people at academic management levels get better informed  
25       about who does what, how much, and how well, on the shop floor. Neither am I in  
26       favor of PhD theses taking forever. But assessment procedures need to be better  
27       attuned to the pluralism of scholarship and its disciplines. Clearly, there is now a  
28       fairly widespread understanding of that at least in the human sciences, although it  
29       is not so certain how receptive policy makers will be to this understanding.

30  
31       **DB:** Cosmopolitanism has been a conceptual or theoretical interest of yours for  
32       some time as well as a problem of ethics and practice. At the risk of framing this  
33       too dualistically, is there a broader lesson to be drawn here as to how Ulf Hannerz  
34       navigates the relationship between anthropological theory and practice? What are  
35       the theoretical and practical issues of greatest concern to you today?  
36

37       **UH:** My engagement with cosmopolitanism really began rather accidentally. In  
38       the mid-1980s, when I gave a talk at Berkeley on my growing interest in global-

1        ization, Paul Rabinow, who was in the audience, asked if I had thought about  
2        cosmopolitanism. I had to reply that I had not (it later turned out that he had). But  
3        that irritated me, and I realized that I should. So a little later, for a rather unusual  
4        academic get-together called the “First International Conference on the Olym-  
5        pics and East/West and South/North Cultural Exchanges in the World System”  
6        in Seoul in 1987, I pulled together my thoughts in a paper which was really a sort  
7        of stream-of-consciousness piece. Then that paper made its way into one high-  
8        visibility publication, and hitting the first wave of revived interest in cosmopoli-  
9        tanism in several disciplines, it became one of my most cited publications. I want  
10       to mention that history of the paper partly to show that it was done for a gathering  
11       engaged with cultural issues, but especially because it was done in what was still  
12       the Cold War era. (There was a Soviet sport sociologist among the participants in  
13       the Seoul conference, and he was followed around by South Korean plainclothes  
14       detectives with walkie-talkies.) Then, in the 1990s, that rapid growth of interest  
15       in cosmopolitan theory and practice occurred, with more of an emphasis on the  
16       ethics and politics of it all, in a period of optimism about what the world could  
17       do together. I am afraid in the early 2000s, Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush, and  
18       Osama bin Laden together dampened that optimism. Anyway, so when I came  
19       back to cosmopolitanism, a main question seemed to be how the more cultural-  
20       experiential-esthetic dimension of the concept that I had been dealing with related  
21       to the more ethical-civic-political dimension. When I gave a talk on this to a cul-  
22       tural studies group in Tokyo, my colleagues there said there was no native term  
23       in Japanese that really covered both dimensions. So is this just a sort of disease  
24       of Western languages, to conflate the two? I think they can, at times, exist quite  
25       separately, and potentially there can even be a certain tension between them, but  
26       I would also think they are often mutually supportive.

27       Okay, that got to be quite long. What am I trying to do now? I have a long-term  
28       interest in another post–Cold War development, the genre of global future scenar-  
29       ios that began with people like Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, on the  
30       academic side, and Thomas Friedman and Robert Kaplan, on the journalist side,  
31       and which has continued to grow ever since. This is an interest not just in these  
32       as texts, to be critiqued as such, but also in their significance in forming a global  
33       public consciousness—mostly American in origin but translated into many lan-  
34       guages, ubiquitously available in airport book stalls, remembered through those  
35       seductive one-liners and sound-bites: “the end of history,” “the clash of civiliza-  
36       tions,” “the world is flat.” A blurb for the German edition of Huntington’s book  
37       [*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*] describes its thesis  
38       rather pithily as “Kulturknalltheorie”—I think that suggests something about why

1 an anthropologist might be provoked by the kind of culturespeak you find in many  
2 of these scenarios.

3 Then, as another current interest, which I have been developing particularly in  
4 a collaboration with Andre Gingrich in Vienna, I am exploring the anthropology  
5 of “small countries” (like the Scandinavian ones and Austria). We had a small  
6 conference recently in Landskrona, a southern Swedish town which is close to  
7 my summer home but also conveniently close to the Copenhagen airport, so col-  
8 leagues could fly in from places like New Zealand, Singapore, and the United  
9 Arab Emirates to participate—we do not want this exercise to become too Euro-  
10 centric. We are certainly not aiming to identify some essence of smallness, but  
11 there are interesting family resemblances. At best, I think one may find a certain  
12 ease of access in networks internally (see what I said about Norway before), and  
13 some cosmopolitan inclinations in external relations. But, certainly, there may be  
14 some recurrent, less attractive qualities as well.

15 Well, that may be mostly over on a theoretical side. But I think you can see that  
16 those, too, fit into my general concern with the way the world comes together, in  
17 academia and elsewhere—and the part anthropology can have in that. It would  
18 be nice if the world was flat, a more level playing field, but we are not there now.  
19 Even the order of production and circulation of those global future scenarios, and  
20 the debate over them, shows that.

21  
22 **DB:** It seems to me as though there is an attractive symmetry between these two  
23 projects. On the one hand, you are looking at the epistemic work of envisioning  
24 “the global” and, on the other hand, recognizing the enduring plurality of small-  
25 ness in the world today. Does this balancing of large and small scales perhaps say  
26 something about the state of anthropology’s own scenario building and “culture-  
27 speak” today? As one of anthropology’s first analysts of the dynamics of global-  
28 ization, would you comment on the status of “the global” as an analytic category  
29 for anthropology today. Where is it still useful, where less so?  
30

31 **UH:** I remember that in an afterword I wrote for a book on “globalization and  
32 identity” in the late 1990s, I suggested that the time was quickly coming when  
33 globalization as such might not be a focal research interest any longer. Whatever it  
34 may stand for would be normalized as a part of the significant context of a variety  
35 of kinds of studies. But it was never really a favorite term of mine. I have used  
36 *global ecumene* some number of times, to indicate a more wide-reaching socio-  
37 cultural openness, drawing on a notion that has deep historical roots. But apart  
38 from that, I have often preferred the term *transnational* to refer to phenomena

1 that cross national boundaries—which certainly still does not mean that they are  
2 truly “global.” That, then, has been a way of breaking out of the straitjacket of  
3 methodological nationalism which I think is still quite strong in many disciplines,  
4 although perhaps less so in anthropology. I think once anthropology broke out of  
5 its own commitment to “the local,” its ethnographic discovery procedures helped  
6 it follow linkages wherever they took it.

7 It is true that I have had a certain interest in small-scale things and in scale  
8 generally. I took an early interest in symbolic interactionism in more or less classic  
9 sociology, for insights into cultural process, and I tend to follow writings on micro-  
10 macro issues in social theory. But our “small countries” are not really small-scale  
11 in that sense. A country with 10 million inhabitants is still *relatively* small, com-  
12 pared to China or the United States or Germany. We are concerned with scale  
13 in a comparative sense, but then we also want to explore what “country” stands  
14 for now, socially and culturally. If many other disciplines may have been overly  
15 committed to a national framework, anthropology has done remarkably little at  
16 this level, and with that attractive contrast of “the global and the local,” too many  
17 intermediate levels have tended to be disregarded. Perhaps the main organized  
18 effort to do an anthropology of “the national” is still that of the national character  
19 studies of the 1940s. But that was in large part a war effort, during World War II,  
20 with Americans using unconventional ethnographic methods (and questionable  
21 theories) to understand adversaries, or more or less problematic allies. So then  
22 “countries” become obvious units, and in large part, fairly naturally, this was  
23 about “large countries”: Japan, Russia, [and] to an extent Britain.

24 What should we do about “the global” now? I am not sure it was ever that much  
25 of an analytical term in any strict sense. It may cover too many things—and at the  
26 same time it is unfortunate that in some minds it is so strongly tied only to expand-  
27 ing markets. But I think we should understand the value of having some number  
28 of words which sensitize in a general and preliminary way to types of phenomena,  
29 qualities, problems, issues. *The global* will probably remain among those. And so  
30 will *culture* and *civilization* and no doubt a great many others. Many of them will  
31 remain in wide public use, and if we want to be in contact with wider publics and  
32 their concerns, as commentators or for that matter as whistleblowers (in relation  
33 to some culturespeak, for one thing), avoiding their keywords may not be a wise  
34 strategy. Dominic, I think that takes us back to where we started this conversation.

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**Interview:**  
**Ulf Hannerz**

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