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Industrial modernity in a paradox-ridden boomtown

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Thomas Hylland Eriksen: *Boomtown. Runaway Globalisation on the Queensland Coast*. London: Pluto Press; 272 pp.

One would imagine that boomtowns in the West belong to the nineteenth or twentieth century while the current post-industrial economies are hi-tech and clean, no longer based on extractive industries or relatively secure unionised white male workers. Yet, Thomas Hylland Eriksen's ethnography of current-day boomtown Gladstone in Australia describes a town that is somehow stuck in the era of fossil fuels and unshakable optimism in industrial modernity. Nevertheless, while seeming antiquated, it is simultaneously completely contemporary, perhaps post-modern, situated in the midst of the unpredictable global flows of capital serving the economy of China and its growing needs for raw materials. Such paradoxes and ambiguities of industrial versus post-industrial, optimism versus a sense of environmental hazard make 'Boomtown' a fascinating read.

In this book, T. H. Eriksen looks at Gladstone in a wider framework of global overheating which he conceptualises as 'a series of converging forms of accelerated change in the domains of identity and culture, climate and the environment as well as economy and finance' (p. 3). In Gladstone, this accelerated change is based on the fossil fuel economy, expectations of ever continuing growth regardless of environment and fast and shallow social relations. Gladstone captures the situation of Australia in general: it is both the major contributor and the victim to global climate change, for example Gladstone industries are very close to the Great Barrier Reef. In general, this is an ethnography about the short-sightedness of humans who cannot

stop living what they imagine to be a good life based on industry and Australia as a country that cannot stop behaving like there is no tomorrow.

'Boomtown' is one of the numerous publications that came out of a large European Research Council project 'Overheating: three crises of globalisation' led by Thomas Hylland Eriksen, a professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo. The project focussed on manifestations of globalisation as seen in accelerated climate change, economic realm and cultural connectedness comparatively in five continents.

The book starts with untangling social relations in Australia and in Gladstone. Gladstone is a boomtown in its classical sense, characterised by short social memory and very few long-time locals. It accepts newcomers based on the lowest common denominators, based on core Australian values of self-reliance and labour, a 'rugged individualism'. One is welcome if they like sports, the outdoors, barbecue and drinking and work to support their family. Aboriginals who are seen as not sharing the same work ethic, do not fit this ideal; nor Muslims who do not drink beer and eat sausage like the rest. Gladstone identity is thin, flexible and accepting as long as it does not challenge the core Australian values inspired by the cultural trope of the little man winning the battle against big and unpredictable forces.

Gladstone is an old boomtown that has dealt with change for decades, it knows that it can only keep existing if it keeps growing. The town has an optimistic vision of industrial modernity, a belief in a bright future based on progress and growth and rejects alternative viewpoints. The central character in the town is a white male unionised industrial worker who earns enough to live comfortably, bring up his children and secure his future. Regardless of its optimism, Gladstone has many problematic features of any boomtown: skewed demographics of more young men than women, no pensioners who tend to leave for more scenic places instead of taking up local volunteering; stress, drug use and strain on family life for the FIFO (Fly-in-fly-out workers).

On the surface, optimistic Gladstonites pay just as little attention to environmental problems as one would in a nineteenth- or early twentieth-century boomtown. T. H. Eriksen went to do his field research with an assumption that the

city is ridden with open local and global environmental conflicts between corporations, workers and environmentalists. In reality, there were very few environmental activists around and the most vocal ones had left the city. Environmental concerns are not high on the list of everyday discussion topics in Gladstone, since they conflict with local value regimes. It is not appropriate to bite the hand that feeds you and Gladstonites were cautious not to criticise the employers and be labelled as 'greenies' unpatriotic of the town and its way of life. Most of local environmental activism aims to either deal with cosmetic changes in collaboration with industries or work on strictly local issues, being optimistic about technological solutions to environmental problems. There is an inherent uneasiness about the incompatibility of sustainability and growth but it does not get voiced openly. Health is an exception since the inhabitants notice how the local environment negatively affects their health.

Nevertheless, due to pollution and health issues, critics do emerge but mostly not among those gainfully employed in the industry but another archetypically Australian group who have come to conquer the land and make profit – farmers. Although farmers and miners both can be seen as historically appropriating the land from Aborigines and upsetting the surface or the underground of the virgin land, farmers of the Gladstone now feel like guardians of the land who have planted orchards, built a community and looked after the land only to be chased out by a pollution and disease. The egalitarian individualism and the cultural trope of the little man winning the battle becomes increasingly discredited as the corporations and the government take little notice on local needs, suggestions and protests.

Corporate actors are, no doubt, the negative but distant characters in this ethnography. They seldom appear as immediate actors in contact with the ethnographer but are rather represented through the Corporate Social Responsibility practices that do little good for the environment, through outright disregard of legal requirements or community demands, through incompetence, greed and negligence. The failed attempts of boomtowners and local farmers to negotiate with corporations clearly show the inequality of powers and incommensurability of scales. In the fight against giants, the local places become too small and serious health issues 'statistically too insignificant' to draw any conclusions.

Corporations reject local knowledge that is based on the everyday experience of the environment for often dubious scientific reports. It teaches the locals who fear they are regarded as uneducated hillbillies to learn to respond in scientific language but even this does little to challenge the corporations. Small agricultural villages polluted by the fossil fuel industries become victims of the politics and economics of scale where small communities cannot beat global industries often backed up by the government. Ironically, when the boom slows down, the larger industries that have invested millions in one type of production are less flexible than local farmers who can adjust what to produce more quickly.

T. H. Eriksen's book is written in an accessible style aiming to avoid heavy anthropological theory and jargon, in order to allow his informants to also enjoy the book. The key concepts such as 'overheating' or 'clashing scales' grow out of the ethnographic setting, a city that is a model for 'runaway globalisation'. The relatively short four-month fieldwork and the character of research in urban settings means that the ethnographic knowledge is an assemblage of interviews, events and meetings. It makes the ethnography feel slightly thin at times but since the unit of analysis is the town, rather than a particular group, community or workplace, T. H. Eriksen conveys the overall character of it very well. The book is relevant for anyone who is interested in how globalisation works on the ground in terms of economies, the environment and cultural encounters and is a good example how ethnographic fieldwork can tell us about small places reflecting on large issues. Nevertheless, as we learn about the clash of scales where the local worries are too 'statistically insignificant' to deserve attention, we might also ask, what does such clash of scales say about anthropology, does fieldwork in small places also become too insignificant to address large issues. Apart from the short period of fieldwork sometimes affects the depth of the ethnography and a few wording issues that the editor has overlooked, the book is an excellent read in trully global ethnography.

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