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## **Anthropology, AI and The Future of Human Society : RAI, London, 6-10 June 2022**

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Duterte's election and the continuing popularity of Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Le Pen and others.<sup>1</sup>

Second, anthropologists, like historians, know a lot about organizing resistance, finding majority support measures to improve the lives of ordinary people and how governments can be forced to change in the face of people's anger and hope. There is probably no one on the planet who does not now see the connections on the left between Greta Thunberg's fierce accusations, the school strikes, Extinction Rebellion, MeToo, the fight for abortion rights, the new campaigns to unionize workplaces, BlackLivesMatter and the war in Ukraine.

The various Green New Deal and Climate Jobs campaigns make sense of both sides of this equation: both the scale and determination of the carbon elite and the appeal of the socialist reforms and jobs. Because the threat of climate change is global, and resistance is contagious, if, and when, a Green New Deal or Climate Jobs campaign finds success in one country, there is every reason to think many others will quickly follow (Neale 2021).

A series of national movements are now part of an international network of activists from Portugal to the Philippines. Two examples, the first from Norway. The Bridge to the Future is an established climate jobs campaign recognized throughout the country and supported by the Norwegian church and many unions aiming to stop fossil fuel emissions and move away from Norwegian oil (Ytterstad 2015).

The second is from southern Africa. Eriksen writes about the 2018 drought in Cape Town, and how people there learned to save water and reduced consumption by 60 per cent.

I was in Cape Town in the third year of that drought. Water usage was reduced by systematically cutting the supply to working-class and township communities while keeping the supply open to the houses of professionals and

the rich, who used far more water. And Eriksen ignores the connections between people's response to the drought and the sexual and corruption scandals of Zuma, the police violence in the strikes at Marikana, the MeToo demonstrations and a growing South African climate jobs campaign there (AIDC 2016).

Moreover, water for cities is a much smaller issue than the long climate change droughts that devastate agriculture and animal husbandry across southern Africa. In an excellent book, the anthropologist James Ferguson writes about how permanent monthly government grants to all the rural poor can help them cope, though, ultimately, these are droughts which can only be moderated by global action (Ferguson 2015).

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1. <https://annebonnyprivate.org/2022/03/02/putin-modi-and-trump-ukraine-and-right-wing-populism/>.

Nancy Lindisfarne taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Her most recent book, with Richard Tapper, is *Afghan village voices* (2020). She blogs at *annebonnyprivate* with Jonathan Neale.

## THOMAS HYLLAND ERIKSEN REPLIES

I thank Nancy Lindisfarne for this thoughtful and detailed comment on my guest editorial in AT (June 2022). While she usefully adds to and elaborates on some of the points I did not develop for lack of space – connections between different crises, inequality, successful initiatives frequently drawing on local knowledge – she seems to have misunderstood part of my argument. Far from being satisfied with 'adaptation', I am convinced that fundamental systemic changes are urgently needed, and that a reduction in emissions is the key. This is why I speak of the commons, diversity

and local knowledge, which can, with all due respect, hardly be seen as 'quaint' concepts in social anthropology. Moreover, I can assure Lindisfarne that I do not question the validity of the physics of climate research, but one contribution from anthropology to this crucial conversation consists in showing how solutions must make sense locally, as the studies mentioned in her comment (as well as those mentioned in my editorial) indicate. Many natural scientists, some of them IPCC authors, are aware of such shortcomings in their models; some have actually approached me after the guest editorial with a view to developing an interdisciplinary conversation where 'the human factor' is not relegated to a footnote. ●

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# conferences

## ANTHROPOLOGY, AI AND THE FUTURE OF HUMAN SOCIETY

RAI, London, 6-10 June 2022

More than 600 people attended the Royal Anthropological Institute's online conference on 'Anthropology, AI and the future of human society'.

With a total of five plenary sessions, no less than 53 panels and seven roundtables, the week was eventful and gathered virtual participants from around the globe.

The attendees addressed a wide range of topics surrounding a broad understanding of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Panels portrayed diverse emerging technologies that involve data collection and automation. The trope of futurism converged with questions of AI and new technologies and the relationship between

anthropology and the future. All sorts of variants could arise henceforth: anthropology of AI, anthropology of the future, the future of anthropology and even artificial intelligence in the practice of anthropology.

Undoubtedly, one primary subject of debate that traversed at least the plenary discussions concerned the extent to which anthropology as a discipline could and should advise stakeholders on implementing emerging technologies. In this regard, some keynote speakers provided illustrative examples of the effective mobilization of ethnographic methods for the 'alignment of automation with people's futures'. Opening keynote speaker Sarah Pink sought to promote in-depth interviews and participant observation as a guardrail against industry visions that do not correspond to people's expectations and ways of life. Numerous panel talks thereby contributed to unpacking

this and called for refining the rationale behind automated programmes. How *smart* can a so-called smart home be, amongst other examples, if the machine cannot grasp the social context? Keynote speaker Gillian Tett's message was similar in arguing that anthropology is very much needed to foster a 'lateral vision' of human life needs. This vision is attentive to context and the 'social silences' overcoming algorithms' capacity for detecting noise.

Where ethnography seemed the most revealing, participants' presentations dissected the very type of *intelligence* afforded by emerging technologies. From remote-sensing data collection and face recognition algorithms to artificial organs and ecological life-support systems, panellists aptly showcased how human techniques are entangled in social relations and potentially conflicting values about the future we are to build. Importantly, not

only did panels explore how humans apprehend the use of novel technologies, but they also showed how new forms of future envisioning are being shaped through their introduction. Indeed, prediction being at the heart of many automated devices, an area of anthropological interest concerns how AI experts deal with uncertain futures in the same way that divination is used in various societies.

So, the question is, should anthropologists 'simply' map out the social within techniques and people's relationship with the future, or should we use that knowledge to shape a changing world? At stake here is an expectation of where our discipline should take its stand within the institutional ecology of knowledge production. A case is to be made for anthropology's 'lateral' insight to feed back into product and service design to make people's lives more humane. The question remains whether the contours of the social relations studied by a design ethnographer are not too constrained – be it only at an analytical level – by the sponsor's aim. Consider the example in one panel of a smart home designer interested in how vocal commands can undermine household authority by allowing multiple voices to control the home. What good would it bring the designer to learn more from ethnography than the

cross-cultural differences concerning values of control within a household? How would further problematization of the institutionalization of parental authority in nuclear homes add anything to the service design process if the issue is not within that very stakeholder's realm?

The aim here is not to say that drawing social analysis from universities in the Euro-American world is any more neutral or that such an endeavour does good to society – this certainly brings its complications. Nevertheless, the panel diversity showed that the issues raised by ethnographers are so multifaceted that some form of anthropology should remain panoptic in its scope and be detached from the will to better some discrete aspects of people's lives. This is where ethnography benefits from shifting back from the specific power relations of one field to the (ideally) independent and publicly accessible nature of university knowledge. It is also where the institutional dynamics of various stakeholders in the field can be problematized critically. This approach was well represented at the conference when the very project of implementing some technologies that are not necessarily beneficial to potential users or some marginalized communities could be questioned in the first place.

What this stimulating conference highlighted, then, was the potential for a wide array of anthropological engagements with AI in the future of human society. The future of anthropology should indeed be plural, if we want to engage – while always problematizing our engagement – with a broad range of stakeholders through ethnographic expertise. In this respect, the conference fruitfully included an Indigenous Films Futures exhibition which promoted visual media to communicate ethnographic issues.

Finally, some panels asked what AI and related technologies could offer to anthropological practice itself. Suppose some anthropologists collect large amounts of information for automated analysis to be relevant. In that case, it still feels like ethnographic sensitivities to contextual meaning remain the last realm in which AI could hardly prove relevant if it is to remain a technology meant to assist humans. The day a machine can replace anthropologists, not only will we be out of job – but it might very well mean the end of humanity. ●

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## obituary

### WILLIAM LANCASTER (1938-2022)

Much like Barth, a hugely respected and admired anthropologist several decades earlier, William Lancaster came to anthropology via a curiosity about the archaeology of the Arab world. He was offered an opportunity to participate in an excavation run by the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem through a chance encounter between his father, Sir Osbert Lancaster (the renowned cartoonist and architectural historian), and Kathleen Kenyon at an Oxford 'gaudy' dinner. The dig, directed by Peter J. Parr was in Petra, the ancient capital of the Nabataeans, where William served as one of the excavation photographers. Like the local people, a Bedouin tribe called the Bdül, the team lived in caves used and often carved out by the Nabataeans. William became fascinated by the Bdül, who were extremely poor at the time and almost totally unaffected by Western technology and values. Through this, he realized that he was more interested in studying the living than the dead.

He then went to learn Arabic at the Middle East Centre for Arabic Studies (MECAS) in Shemlan, Lebanon. Anthropologists in the region are almost always accused of being spies. Their day-to-day involvement with individuals during fieldwork, poking around and asking many questions, inevitably leads to such accusations, sometimes in jest and sometimes not. In William's case, it was certainly

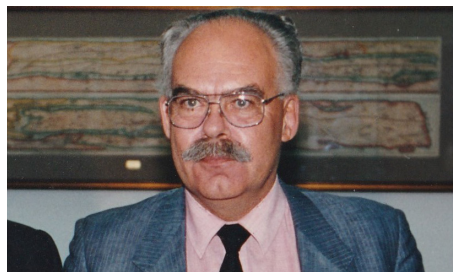


Fig. 1. William Lancaster.

the former, as he was always quite open that he had studied Arabic at MECAS, the famous British 'spy school' where he had met Kim Philby and George Blake. The families of the Rwala Bedouin, whom William later lived and migrated with, teased him mercilessly about being a spy!

After he returned to the UK, William met and married Fidelity, who was to be his partner in all his future research. He went up to Magdalene College, Cambridge, to read archaeology and anthropology, and while there made his first anthropological study, namely of Hennage, the Norfolk village where he lived. *Hennage: A social system in miniature* (1974) was a short work which belonged to the classic structural-functional school of anthropology. This monograph on the social life and customs of a rural village in the UK took its place beside many other enormously important teaching texts that contributed to the *Case studies in cultural anthropology* series,

first published by Holt, Reinhart and Winston in the 1960s. After completing this study, and perhaps because of his experience of archaeological excavations in Jordan, William and Fidelity embarked on their work together in the Arab world.

William and Fidelity made a remarkable partnership. Together they managed to live and migrate with the tents of the shaykhly lineage of the Rwala Bedouin, the Sha'laan. This was the first of their many anthropological field studies in the Middle East. Their distinct and separate household among the Sha'laan tents was talked about among the Bedouins for decades. They lived with their children among the Rwala where Fidelity maintained the family tent and played a crucial role recording from the women the detailed family genealogies of the Sha'laan in their orbit that was critical to the analysis that emerged. *The Rwala Bedouin today* (1981), published by Cambridge University Press, became one of the outstanding scholarly works on contemporary Bedouin society in the Arab world. The fact that William and Fidelity later maintained a sheep farm on the island of Hoy in the Orkney Islands was a social reality and badge of honour that Sha'laan Bedouin whom I met later in my fieldwork, never failed to bring up. 'William has his own sheep; how about you?'

My introduction to William came via a letter he sent me while I was living in Oman and preparing my manuscript on two Bedouin tribes in the Syria-Lebanon region, the