

A manifesto against property Anthropological anger in an era of greed and destruction

Oscar Salemink and Thomas Hylland Eriksen¹

The term *polycrisis*, coined by Edgar Morin at the turn of the millennium (Morin and Kern 1999), has been picked up by a handful of commentators recently, and it was also recently the topic of a special issue of *Anthropology Today* (Henig and Knight 2023, see also Kalb 2023). Ranging from biodiversity loss and climate change to mounting inequalities both globally and domestically, a widespread sense of powerlessness spreads even in countries considered democratic, often feeding conspirators, ethnonationalists, right-wing populists and others who promise simple answers to complex questions.

In this short but polemical intervention, we argue simply that property is at the root of these interrelated crises. It may not be that property as such is inherently destructive in the vein of Rousseau and Proudhon, but its ubiquity, up-scaling to transnational and often global levels, the complicity of governments and capitalists, and the lack of accountability on the part of owners in a globally integrated growth-driven capitalist economy has produced a world where nothing counts if it cannot be counted, and all that is counted is the object of property claims. In this context, anthropology has an important political mission, which can be traced back to the founders of the modern discipline, who taught us about diversity, reciprocity, and the moral aspect of economic activities.

One may only think of the way a word such as “resources” is being used unthinkingly, as if everything could be utilized for human profit. And this does not just concern corporate power; the logic of the profit-seeking corporation has also entered, disrupted and in many cases destroyed community life. At such an intimate scale, privatization and the commodification of property has taken place at an accelerated speed since neoliberalism became hegemonic in the 1980s. The neoliberal economist Hernando de Soto's grand idea, implemented mainly in his native Peru, but also elsewhere, that shack owners and small landowners in the informal sector should acquire title deeds to their de facto property, enabling them to acquire loans for investments, are a typical expression of neoliberalism and was resisted by activists (besides, titling did not, as it turned out, facilitate credit, certainly not at an acceptable price, which was the primary aim). The point is that any kind of ownership or stewardship which is not individual, corporate, or vested in a state, is contested and usually dismissed. And, make no mistake, this is not an issue which mainly concerns “the wretched of the Earth”, from slumdweller to Indigenous groups, but a virus that is infecting people everywhere. One of the major human insights to be gleaned from well over a century of serious anthropological research is that things



could always be otherwise. The naturalization of a given order is often unconscious, and it always benefits certain people while others have to foot the bill.

Allow a few vignettes. On September 16, 2023, the small-scale farmer, writer and publisher Olav Randen wrote an op-ed piece in the Norwegian daily *Klassekampen* titled “From summer pasture to playground” (*Frå stølsvoll til leikegrind*, Randen 2023), arguing that his home valley had been transformed beyond recognition. An example is a 400 square meter “cabin” owned by one of the country’s richest men, whose property rights also prevent locals from exercising their traditional rights to hunt, fish and pick berries.

Randen rounds off his verbal missive like this: “The former summer pasture is a Norway in miniature. Slowly and surely, attractive nature becomes a source of profit or playground for transnational tycoons. Slowly and surely, property rights and usufruct rights are transferred from rural community to city and onwards to fiscal paradises. Either the political authorities do not want to object, or they dare not.”

Are there any readers out there who cannot think of a parallel case, whether from their home turf or from the field? We are unable not to think of a plethora of such cases. Earlier this year, a Mauritian friend of Eriksen showed him what was left of a path where they used to take their bikes to swim in a pond and hide from their parents when he grew up in the 1990s. The entire area was now fenced in and being “developed” for rich expatriates. Land is being converted from communal tenure to individual ownership everywhere, leading to conflicts between haves and have-nots as well as a social ontology based on suspicion rather than cooperation.

In the economic system, which is no longer just hegemonic but virtually universal, everything can potentially be turned into a “thing” that can be owned, and that is actually claimed as someone’s property. James Boyle (2002) wrote about the fencing off (enclosure) of ideas through intellectual property rights as the “second enclosure movement”. In *The new*

imperialism, David Harvey (2003) extended his notion of accumulation by dispossession to culture (that which some Indigenous groups, and others, call “cultural appropriation”, which they want to be repatriated or restituted). Salemink has written about heritage (prefixed with cultural, natural, intangible, national, etc.) as a simultaneous enclosure and a property claim, showing that the logic of capitalism has spread to ideas and other immaterial products. In *The age of surveillance capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff (2019) analyzes how our online and offline lives become data that can be marketed.

When participating in clinical trials, Salemink’s body and the data it generated become the property of the pharmaceutical company financing the trial. This practice is common and legal as long as the “donor” is anonymized. In *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks*, Rebecca Skloot (2010) explores the pharmaceutical aftermath of Henrietta Lacks’ cancer cells. Lacks, an American tobacco farmer, died of cervical cancer in 1951, and her cancer cells, now known in laboratories by the acronym HeLa, have led to major medical advances. Her children and other close relatives became aware of this many years later. Her cells were no longer part of her body, but a commodity owned by a corporation. As Skloot explains:

When you show up to the doctor, you’d get a form saying, essentially, we want to store your tissues for future biomedical research; we can’t tell you exactly what that research might involve, and you can’t specify how your tissues are used. We may share your identity with other researchers, with privacy protections in place. And we may contact you for future research. Is that O.K.? (Skloot 2015)

The pharmaceutical company did to Skloot’s cancer cell what the tech giants are doing to our participation in the digital world. The legitimacy of converting knowledge, personal data and even parts of our bodies into property is taken for granted.

Value as opposed to values

A world where everything is owned is antithetical to the values of most of the people anthropologists have worked with. As Indigenous leaders may explain when asked why they lack written proof of ownership to their territory: “We do not own the land; the land owns us.” Conflating (economic) value and (moral) values makes this kind of argument difficult.

Yet this is exactly the kind of conjuring trick that is being imposed on us now. In the world as it functions now, protection of property and the market trumps the protection of human lives and the environment on which we depend. The capitalist primacy of property is brought out in such court cases as those of Jeffrey Skilling (Enron) and Elizabeth Holmes (Theranos), who were convicted of fraud not against the people they had swindled, but against their shareholders. The Sackler family, owners of Purdue Pharma and by common consent the main culprits behind the catastrophic opioid crisis in the USA, have been able to pay their way to immunity from litigation, as if value (dollars) could easily be converted into values (decent lives).

Ordinary people (i.e., non-millionaires) who have fallen victim to such fraudulent schemes, are, other than the speculators, not being compensated; just as those who received compensation after the end of slavery in the British and French colonies were the former slaveowners, not the liberated slaves.

The protection of property has globalized through regional and global trade and other agreements. One may only think of how difficult it is to keep the International Seabed Authority from allowing deep-sea mining (which is likely to take place in the near future). A further example, which again shows the primacy and ubiquity of property, concerns the so-called redevelopment of Barbuda.

The small Caribbean island of Barbuda, politically part of Antigua and Barbuda, had about 1,700 inhabitants before much of the infrastructure was damaged by Hurricane Irma in 2017. The prime minister of the country (which is

dominated by the larger and more populous Antigua) implored all residents to leave, promising that they could return when all was safe (Mohammed 2023). However, soon after the evacuation of the island, it turned out that the trucks, excavators, and workers were not rebuilding homes, schools, and shops for the locals, but resorts and a private airport.

Local councilors and activists from Barbuda have explained that historically, land was communally owned, entailing that all residents had usufruct rights to a plot of land. Amid the current privatization, warmly supported by the government based in Antigua, communal ownership will be impossible to maintain (L. Boyle 2021).

The contradiction between labor and capital remains fundamental and is boosted by the financialization and globalization of capitalism. Moreover, the transition of everything into property does not only lead to inequality, political powerlessness and mounting asymmetries between corporations and communities. It also exacerbates the other main contradiction in the 21st century, between capitalist growth and ecological sustainability. The removal of mangroves in Barbuda is an excellent illustration. Mangroves lining the coastline have always protected Barbuda and similar coral islands from storms, but are now being removed *en masse* for the short-time benefit of wealthy tourists. Returnees to the island now encounter a very different place from the one they left; one where everything that counts can be counted.

Flexibility loss as collateral damage

It is abundantly documented how the global economic monoculture favoring privatization, growth, upscaling and the logic of the market removes morality and responsibility from the world of production, distribution and consumption. One outcome of this global homogenization consists in the loss of flexibility, seen as options and alternatives. There are striking parallels between descriptions of species extinction and biodiversity loss, as detailed in Eliza-

beth Kolbert's *The sixth extinction* (2014), and the situation regarding cultural diversity today, not least as regards small, stateless groups, although everybody is affected by the Anthropocene-cum-Capitalocene effects.

Kolbert identifies a series of causes for "the sixth extinction", taking lessons from the previous five extinctions as she goes along (the most famous of which was the temporary cooling of global climate following a meteor crashing on Yucatán, 66 million years ago, and leading to the extinction of the dinosaurs).

Some of the causes of extinction are species invasion, habitat loss or fragmentation, over-exploitation of natural resources, and natural disasters. But the most important cause, related to some of the others, is anthropogenic ecological destabilization, that is pollution and climate change.

Parallels can be drawn between Kolbert's analysis of biodiversity loss and processes affecting people and their cultural worlds. Habitat loss resembles the effects of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2003) whereby people lose their homes and livelihood owing to infrastructural developments, becoming urbanized or proletarianized because there is no other option available. Overexploitation of resources also deprives Indigenous people of their livelihood, and species invasion may have a parallel in the homogenizing effects of states and markets. Climate change, needless to say, affects people as well as the rest of nature.

Culture has different internal dynamics than biology, but this should not detract attention from the parallels. Benevolent state policies on indigenous matters resemble the thinking behind national parks. The relentless desire of states and corporations to translate everything into controllable, measurable, and profitable "resources", that we alluded to above, contribute to upscaling and homogenization in both realms. The benefits of homogenization are gauged with the universal standards of modernity and capitalism: Economic growth, improved access to education, reduced child mortality, improved sanitation and so on. Not everybody benefits.

Some are faced with the bill without having had the chance to reap the benefits. Ultimately, everybody loses because future options are narrowed, and we are collectively painting ourselves into a corner. The greatest loss, seen from a long-term global perspective, is the loss of flexibility. The insistence on a single economic system presupposing eternal growth, a few highly productive food crops and, not least, the destructive and potentially catastrophic reliance on fossil fuels, leads to a game with high stakes and one that cannot be won in the long term.

Recapturing the commons

Against this backdrop, and being mindful of the accumulated insights from anthropological thinking and research, we are convinced that the kind of knowledge represented in our profession can be mobilized in a bid to recapture the commons from the growth ideology of capitalism based on individual, state, or corporate property.² When speaking of the commons, a broad definition is needed, which includes ideas, culture, our bodies and our very lives, to counter the transformation into property of all these phenomena and more. Perhaps one place to start could be in some form of re-assemblage or even re-enchantment (recall Weber on the disenchantment of the world), that is replacing the capitalist logic that splits everything into separate "things" that can be transformed into resources, and thinking systemically of them as parts of larger wholes which cannot and should not be disassembled. Holist syntheses, as opposed to analytical mono-causalities, may be one of our strongest weapons. Not least in the concerted (though usually half-hearted) inter-governmental attempts to stem and halt climate change, a main shortcoming consists in the lack of a holistic approach which regards earth systems and the complexities of human lives as a single system characterized by connections and relationality, just like the life-worlds studied in anthropology. Another shortcoming is the translation of nature into "ecosystem services".

It is time for anthropology to come clean as a countercultural, radical science which does not limit itself to the study of human diversity, but shows how the current, overheated global capitalist system is ecologically destructive, conducive to increased inequality and alienation, and lacking morality. A premise for deep fieldwork as well as comparison is the assumption that fulfilling lives can be led in different ways, not all of them destructive.

We believe that the world needs to be recaptured by the principles of economic anthropology as opposed to the assumed individual rationality represented in economic science, since the former is a far more accurate description of what people actually mean to do. We are not the first to make such programmatic statements. However, our argument in this short intervention has been that good anthropology is *by default* subversive of the current economic world system, independently of the individual anthropologist's political or moral convictions. Some will have the desire, or feel the obligation, to connect the dots, but not all. Anthropologists come in all colors and patterns, but their—our—work explicitly demonstrates the breadth and depth of human diversity, implying that the current capitalist world system is wrong.

Our prediction is that in a near future anthropology, or at least a segment of anthropology, will rightly be regarded, and will proudly regard itself, as an angry discipline; defending the rights of the have-nots and insisting on the duties of the haves, showing why communal stewardship leads to better lives, a better ecosystem and a less inequitable world than the divisive and short-sighted world of global capitalism and economic growth; and showing that there are many paths that have been pursued, still are being practiced and should be taken very seriously in the shadow of the polycrisis. The infamous TINA doctrine (“There Is No Alternative”) urgently needs to be replaced by TAMA (“There Are Many Alternatives”). And who is in a better position to demonstrate the loss of these alternatives, and their possible recapture, than social and cultural anthropologists?

Oscar Saleminck died on 23 September 2023 after a long fight with cancer (born 1958). He was Professor in the Anthropology of Asia at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. A specialist on Vietnam, he published widely on a variety of topics, from religion to economy, always anchoring his research in a broader historical context. Among his most important publications are the co-edited *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (1999, with Peter Pels), *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850–1990* (2003), and the *Focaal* theme section (with Mattias Borg Rasmussen) “After dispossession” (no. 74, 2016). Oscar had been an editor of *Focaal* since 2006.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Oslo, Norway. His research has focused on local responses to global processes, ranging from ethnicity and nationalism to climate change and xenophobia. He is the author of many books, including *Overheating* (2016), *Boomtown* (2018) and *Small Places, Large Issues* (5th edition 2023).

E-mail: t.h.eriksen@sai.uio.no.

Notes

1. Oscar Saleminck, a long-time editor of *Focaal*, sadly passed away on 23 September 2023, after an extended fight with cancer, during the writing up of this article. It was completed by Eriksen in accordance with Oscar's wishes.
2. See also the debates on “owning culture” in *Focaal* 44, 2004, introduced by Deema Kaneff and Alexander D. King; and the urban commons/commoning in *Focaal* 66, 2013, and *Focaal* 94, 2022, led respectively by articles from Ida Susser and Stéphane Tonnelat (2013), and Anne-Christine Trémon (2022).

References

- Boyle, James. 2002. “Fencing off Ideas: Enclosure & the disappearance of the public domain.” *Daedalus* 131 (2): 13–25.

- Boyle, Louise. 2021. "Residents of hurricane-ravaged Barbuda hopeful as UN body signals 'deep concern' over resort for uber-rich." *The Independent*, 16 July.
- Harvey, David. 2003. *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henig, David and Daniel Knight. 2023. "Polycrisis: Prompts for an emerging worldview." *Anthropology Today* 39: 3–6.
- Kalb, Don, 2023. "Two theories of money: On the historical anthropology of the state-finance nexus". *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 95: 92–112.
- Kaneff, Deema and Alexander D. King. 2004. "Introduction: Owning culture", *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 44: 3–19.
- Kolbert, Elizabeth, 2014. *The sixth extinction: An unnatural history*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Mohammed, Kenneth. 2023. "'Billionaire club': The tiny island of Barbuda braces for decision on land rights and nature." *The Guardian*, 26 September.
- Morin, Edgar and Anne Birgitte Kern. 1999. *Home-land earth: A manifesto for the new millennium*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Randen, Olav. 2023. "Frå stølsvoll til leikegrind" ["From summer pasture to playground"]. *Klassekampen*, 15 September.
- Skloot, Rebecca. 2010. *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks*. New York: Crown.
- Skloot, Rebecca. 2015. "Your cells. Their research. Your permission?" *New York Times*, 30 December.
- Susser, Ida and Stéphane Tonnelat. 2013. "Transformative cities: The three urban commons." *Focaal—Journal of global and historical anthropology* 66: 105–121.
- Trémon, Anne-Christine. 2022. "Commoning and publicizing: Struggles for social goods". *Focaal—Journal of global and historical anthropology* 94: 1–19.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. 2019. *The age of surveillance capitalism*. London: Profile Books.