

This interview with Marianne Gullestad was finalized in December 2007, about three months before she died. The interview forms part of a special issue of *Ethnologie française* on Norway to be published in 2009. We hope this English version of the interview on the EASA website will cherish the memory of this eminent scholar.

May 2008, Marianne E. Lien and Marit Melhuus.

Overcoming the division between anthropology ‘at home’ and ‘abroad’

Marianne Gullestad in conversation with Marianne Lien and Marit Melhuus

- How would you describe Norwegian anthropology at home, in relation to that of other countries?

The discipline of social anthropology is in general in very good shape in Norway, with quite a few scholars who contribute excellent work. This is also the case for the so-called anthropology at home, which is more lively here than in most other European countries. When I started studying social anthropology more than thirty years ago, the situation was very different. It was explicitly not expected that doing fieldwork in Norway should lead to an academic career. Since then things have changed completely. Anthropologists who work in Norway are now hired by universities, by the expanding university colleges and by the many independent research institutes for applied social science research. Compared to other European countries, Norway sponsors much applied social science research, and over the last years anthropologists have been hired along with sociologists, political scientists, and economists. The danger is of course that the resulting research is too closely tied to the problems of state and municipal agencies. This danger is indeed very real. But, nevertheless, many researchers have shown that they are able to do imaginative work also within an applied framework, profiting from the grounding in real life problems to make interesting analyses.

- In an article in *Current Anthropology* (2006) you have argued that Norway is ‘special, but not special enough’. Would you expand on this, especially with regard to the implications for doing anthropology at home?

Most anthropologists would agree that one needs to look at specificities in order to be able to identify more general patterns. In the words of Clifford Geertz, small facts speak to large issues. Commuting between specificities and generalities is the primary basis for anthropological insights. At the same time some small facts are no doubt regarded as more interesting than others. Along with the other Nordic countries, Norway holds an ambiguous position within international anthropological scholarship. This position is different from the position of Southern Europe, which to a larger extent has been regarded as ‘other’, and therefore as more relevant for anthropological analysis. Some mainstream anthropologists regard studies of social life in Norway and Northern Europe as belonging to the field of sociology rather than to anthropology. From such a viewpoint, Norway is intrinsically a part of the wealthy West or North; at the same time, it is a country without either imperial political traditions or – with the exception of the Sami – interesting cultural traditions.

In contrast to this view, I see the traditional division of anthropology and sociology, as well as the division between mainstream anthropology and anthropology 'at home', as an inheritance from the binary segregationalism of colonialism. This is, of course, a commonplace idea, but one whose effects demand more reflection if we are going to be able to fully decolonize anthropology. One of the many questions that can be raised is why it is so difficult to attract international attention with empirical material from countries such as Norway. When publishing internationally, I am always asked to include a section on aspects of the special Norwegian context, even in very short articles. On the international social science map, Norway is thus special, but also not special enough. It suffers from a double marginality – in relation to the neo-colonial anthropological constructions of the anthropologically interesting as well as in relation to past and present imperial power. In conventional anthropological contexts, Scandinavia is neither conceived of as a 'metropolis' nor as an 'interesting field' but as something which resides uncomfortably in between.

- You have also reflected upon the unusually strong position – or voice - of anthropologists in public debate in Norway. This is also the topic of Thomas Hylland Eriksen's book 'Engaging Anthropology' (Berg 2006). How do you see your own role in this realm?

I think it is important to be aware of both the complexity and the fragmentation of the public realm and the fact that Norwegian anthropologists take very different roles. I am not talking about differing points of view -- they of course exist -- but about differing public profiles. Some anthropologists, such as Thomas Hylland Eriksen, have the talent and the inclination to act as engaged anthropologists, using their general anthropological knowledge to take part in debates about many issues. Besides writing their own op-ed articles for the national newspapers, they appear on talk-shows on TV and are available when journalists ask them to make comments on the issues of the day.

Other anthropologists, and I am one of them, define their participation as public intellectuals more narrowly in terms of the dissemination of research. I generally try to make my anthropological monographs as accessible as possible, also for students and scholars in other disciplines, and I disseminate my research by writing articles for the national newspapers and the general interest journals and by appearing in the media when a new book is out. However, I do not generally comment upon day-to-day issues, or engage in ongoing debates outside the topics of my research. The key words of my participation are accessibility, providing feedback to the people I work with and dissemination of research.

In addition, many Norwegian anthropologists seldom appear in the national media, but they nevertheless participate in the public realm by, for example, quietly giving talks to various groups. The many regional and local newspapers and radio stations, as well as the rich abundance of government agencies and professional and voluntary associations, provide fora for public debate and the dissemination of anthropological scholarship. I actually believe that more or less all Norwegian anthropologists participate to some extent in the public realm, broadly defined, and that they have done so for quite some time. In this way the situation allows for a variety of roles and styles in public. It is the sum of all this participation that now makes up the strong position of Norwegian anthropologists in the public realm.

- Why do you think the public in Norway is interested in anthropological knowledge?

There are many answers to this question – such as the talent of particular anthropologists, the structure of the media, the nature of civil society, as well as historically well-developed areas of public interest. For example, because of the publication work of the missions – Norway has sent out more missionaries per capita than any other country -- there is a strong interest in development issues and therefore in the experiences of the anthropologists who have worked in the relevant regions of the world. Moreover, Norway is both young and *nouveau riche*, proudly staying outside the EU, with a self-image of competence, goodness and innocence. In popular consciousness, people in Norway are historically innocent with regard to slavery, colonization and racism. Norway is a victim of colonization (by Denmark) and occupation (by Nazi Germany) and not a colonizer. Norway has played an important role in peace negotiations in various regions of the world, and is one of the highest donors of developmental aid relative to its GNP. Gender equality is realized in many sectors of society. In sum, in popular belief Norway is a rich, innocent, humane, tolerant, egalitarian, anti-racist, gender equal and peace-loving society that is committed to helping the needy and has the goal of being among the very best in the world in these respects. Especially since the beginning of the 1990s, there is in this way a narcissistic preoccupation with everything Norwegian in the media, including the findings of the anthropologists ‘at home’. This narcissistic tendency is reinforced by the structure of the media. Norway does not have really high quality daily newspapers, but many tabloid newspapers that also include serious comment and debate. Most newspapers thus cater to the needs of both the highly educated and the not so highly educated. The grounding of anthropological knowledge in ethnography in some ways fits well with the tabloidization and commercialization of the media. Instead of ‘dry numbers and figures’ we often have vivid stories with a human touch to tell. In other ways, however, our knowledge does not fit the media so well, because we usually try to show that things are a lot more complicated than the polarizations of much conventional wisdom. It is difficult to get attention with a message which calls attention to nuances.

- What do you see as the most important implications of this public engagement for Norwegian anthropological scholarship?

Because Norway has a relatively small population and a large reading public, it is often difficult to keep apart the various audiences for social science research (academic, government, political, mass media and so on). Many anthropologists have experienced their ‘informants’ turning up as students at lectures or just reading texts written for scholarly consumption; cabinet ministers, government officers and politicians consulting with them; and aggressive journalists forcing them to take a stand on complex issues. Such experiences of contradictory expectations can simultaneously be both painful and intellectually stimulating and have made many of us discover that we have to change the way we write and talk about our results, as well as the way we frame our analyses. Talking *about* is different from talking *to* and talking *with*. Moreover, some of us have started reflecting more on the fact that the effective dissemination of research is not just a question of wrapping the results nicely, but more basically of the research questions asked and the kinds of collaboration initiated in the first place.

- In your research there is a shift from studying ‘ordinary people’, to studying ‘people with power, including academics’. This exacerbates some challenges regarding ‘the

native speaks back' phenomenon, an issue which is increasingly relevant as anthropologists are working in their own societies. Would you like to reflect on this?

With globalization and the complexities of the modern world, I think that this challenge is now increasingly relevant both 'at home' and 'abroad'. Because the well-off and powerful have more to lose by exposing themselves, it is easier for anthropologists to simultaneously both exploit the lower classes and position ourselves as their advocates. After the publication of a collection of essays in Norwegian called *Det norske sett med nye øyne*, (Norwegianness in a new perspective) in 2002, presenting interpretations of the debates in Norway about 'immigrants', a sensitive issue, I learned that it does make a big difference whether the people represented are elite people with power or marginalized people who are only too used to being portrayed in ways that are not compatible with their own self-images.

The central essays of that book were later published in English in 'Plausible Prejudice'. This book also includes some reflections on what happened. As social scientists we are part of the 'chattering classes', often with much power of definition in relation to the categories of people that we write and talk about. Anthropologists are used to the privilege of looking, and we seem to resist being observed ourselves with anthropological eyes. I think, nevertheless that it is a very important challenge not only to 'study down', but also to 'study sideways', and to 'study up'. And even more importantly, it is a challenge to 'study across' in the sense that we frame our analyses in ways that not only focus on this or that particular group, but in a way that catches the dynamic connections between people and institutions with and without power.

- To what extent would you say that the ethnography about Norway is grounded in a comparative perspective?

It is grounded in an implicit comparative perspective in the sense that the anthropological literature about the many diverse ways of organizing human existence is an analytical inspiration. Being part of the international anthropological scholarship is a way of being continuously reminded of that inspiration. But I think we could do much better in this respect, by engaging more often and more consistently in explicit comparative work.

- You pioneered Norwegian anthropology at home, in the sense that you analyzed everyday life with an ambition to say something more general about Norwegian society and culture. Your coining of the concept 'equality as sameness' in the 1980's has later inspired a number of anthropological studies in Norway. Is this concept still analytically relevant, and in what ways?

The main point of my various ethnographic research projects in Norway has been to show the considerable socio-cultural variation within Norway. In spite of the conventional wisdom that Norway is a homogenous society, there is much variation. For example, in my first research project in the seventies about life in an old part of the city of Bergen, I was able to show that a residential area situated only ten minutes walking distance from the university campus and the city hall contained life worlds that were very different from those of most university professors and politicians. I 'discovered' a rich urban culture adapted to the fact that neighbors lived physically very close to each other. This work was presented as a dissertation in 1975 and as a popular book in Norwegian in 1979. Both were called *Livet i en gammel*

bydel (Life in an old, central city neighborhood). In my second fieldwork, I ‘discovered’ among other things the emergent new stress on home decoration and home improvement in Norway. This work was presented in the monograph ‘Kitchen-Table Society’ in 1984 / 2002 and in a collection of essays called ‘The Art of Social Relations’ in 1992.

But in addition to this strong interest in ethnography, I have also attempted to tease out themes that are common to the various social circles that I and other Norwegian anthropologists have studied. I was particularly alert during my second fieldwork to the differences between me and the women I worked with, but when I began writing up the material I became more aware of the similarities, of what we shared as members of Norwegian or Northern European society. When I had finished that book, I started a series of reflections focusing on rhetorically central value concepts in Norway. Such concepts can simultaneously be shared in the sense that most people understand and are able to use them rhetorically, and not shared in the sense that the concrete meanings attributed vary according to social experience. In ‘The Art of Social Relations’, in particular, I discussed the relationship between Lutheran religion and secularized everyday life in Norway, exploring values such as the home, peace and quiet, independence, equality as sameness (imagined sameness), wholeness, nature and safety/security (*trygghet*). This work was further empirically grounded in the monograph ‘Everyday Life Philosophers’ in 1996. More precisely, I have studied culture in Norway, not Norwegian culture. Only further research can show the changing empirical basis for these themes within Norway and Northern Europe. All too often we tend to take the nation state for granted as a meaningful context of analysis, also when this may not be the case.

Concerning ‘equality as sameness’, I find that this theme is still highly relevant, in partly new ways. In a recent collection of essays called ‘Plausible Prejudice’ (2006), I for example discuss the connections between egalitarian cultural themes and racially coded majority nationalism in Norway. My argument is that there is currently a popular reinforcement of the ethnic dimensions of majority nationalism, with a focus on common culture, ancestry and origin. In particular, the national imagined sameness rests on the metaphor of the nation as a family writ large. Often majority people do not seem to be able to relate to those with a minority background in terms of degrees and modes of diversity and sameness but only in terms of polarized categories. It is as though an outsider must be found in order for the internal sameness, unity, and sense of belonging to be confirmed. ‘Immigrants’ are asked to ‘become Norwegian’ at the same time as it is often tacitly assumed that this is something they never can really achieve. In these contexts the value of equality as sameness means the simultaneous call for sameness and production of difference. History, descent, religion, and morality are intertwined in this form of nationalism, ethnicizing the state as an expression of collective identity. What seems to be at stake for many majority Norwegians is not so much a threat from the new minorities as socio-economic competitors but a threat to the imagined moral community and the Norwegian welfare state as the incarnation of this community. Minority people who do not play down their difference are perceived as provoking hostility, and thus as threatening widespread narratives about Norway as an innocent, homogeneous, tolerant, anti-racist, and peace-loving society. The ideas of sameness based on generalized kinship can be seen as specific combinations and permutations of ideas which can also be found elsewhere in Europe. The consistent and growing use of these ideas is, in my view, one of the main problems in Europe today. The focus on imagined sameness in terms of common descent and cultural sameness makes up an invisible barrier to the acceptance of newcomers as unmarked citizens who belong.

- Your sustained anthropological engagement over several decades with Norwegian ethnography gives you a privileged position from which to reflect on overall changes in Norwegian society. Which ones do you think are particularly interesting to draw attention to?

During these decades family life and the relations between the genders have changed dramatically, as most women have taken up paid work outside the home. This change has profound consequences in most social sectors, but Norway nevertheless still has one of the most gender segregated labor markets in Europe. The most striking social change in the awareness of the public is, however, probably the new immigration from the end of the 1960s onwards. In addition, there is an important change over the last three generations from relative poverty to wealth. When I studied autobiographies written by so-called ordinary people for 'Everyday Life Philosophers', this was a recurrent theme in the stories written by elderly people. They focused on their own changing circumstances, exemplifying that most people have become more affluent. But at the same time, statistical surveys show that the richest ten percent have become considerably more affluent than the others in recent years. Because of the general affluence and the strong public focus on immigration, the increasing social and economic gap between investors, owners, brokers and top managers, on the one hand, and wage earners, on the other, has so far not created much political debate. With the expansion of economic liberalism, similar processes go on in other countries. But the growing inequality and the extent to which many people now live segregated lives no doubt represent a special challenge in Norway. Norwegian institutions are based on the existence of considerable social trust which is again based on the perception of relative closeness and/or sameness among people.

- Majority culture has been your primary focus. Was this a conscious choice?

When I started doing anthropological fieldwork in the beginning of the 1970s, I defined my projects in contrast to the tendency in Europeanist anthropology to study rural communities, reacting against the way anthropologists mainly studied small rural communities in marginalized areas, minorities or other 'deviant populations' of some kind. I saw my first project in an old part of the city as a study of *urban culture* and *working class culture*. This was, so to speak, a community study transposed to a part of the city. The second project, which resulted in 'Kitchen-Table Society', was based on a method using women's networks across the city, and focused on moral discussions. In these two first projects the difference between my way of life and the ways of life of the people I worked with was considerable. And I experienced that making such class differences explicit was - and in some ways still is - a taboo topic in the egalitarian climate of Norwegian society. People easily interpret the representation of differences of social class as a claim to be in some way 'better'. Anthropologists who work 'at home' are in this way seldom just insiders, we are usually both insiders and outsiders to the people we work with. In my writing I have tried the best I can to situate the knowledge I produce by making my own positioning explicit.

Over the years, the need to reflect upon anthropology's tendency to study marginalized populations has become even clearer to me. Such studies have to be framed within majority-minority structures of power and dominance and the global history of colonial and neo-colonial relations. If anthropology is to become a truly comparative discipline, it must also illuminate the cultural practices of groups and categories who define themselves as the normal

ordinary populations against which other categories are seen as deviant in some way, thus marking off realms for anthropological study. In other words, we need to stop taking our research objects as given, and must instead step back and examine how acceptable research objects have been historically constituted within the discipline.

- Your sustained anthropological engagement also reflects your shifting scholarly interests. From an ethnographic focus based on fieldwork on everyday life, you have more recently relied upon texts and visual images as your primary data? What has motivated this shift, and how do you experience the challenges related to the latter approach?

The method of doing fieldwork was invented at a time and in contexts in which anthropologists could not rely on archives and statistics, but had to produce their own data. This method has proven to be very useful also in present-day complex societies where much material is readily available. I think, nevertheless, that it is both possible and advisable to enlarge the anthropological tool kit with new techniques as additions to the ones we use in one-sited and multisited fieldwork. The important point is to continue working ethnographically, and by working ethnographically I mean allowing for the discovery of new connections across social sectors, institutions and disciplines. The ethnographer does not start out with preformulated concepts, but develops them in close contact with the empirical material, whatever it is. The challenge is of course to be able to contextualize texts and images in scholarly productive ways. When analyzing written autobiographies, I had many long conversations with the authors. I also relied on my former fieldwork experiences and on the ethnographies produced by other scholars. When analyzing missionary films and photographs from Cameroon in my most recent monograph called 'Picturing Pity' (2007), I relied on texts published by the missionaries, as well as on conversations with both former missionaries in Norway and many categories of people in Cameroon, including missionaries, Muslims and Christians. Although I have visited Cameroon six times, each time for about three weeks, this can in no way be compared to long term fieldwork. I therefore feel very strongly that my knowledge about life in Cameroon is far too limited. But I nevertheless hope that my readers will find that the perspectives from Cameroon that I have been able to include make the analysis richer and more interesting.

-Throughout your career you have published systematically in Norwegian and English. What are the analytical implications of working bi-lingually?

Compared to scholars who are native speakers of English, anthropologists from small language communities have constantly to carry two heavy backpacks instead of only one. But for me it cannot be otherwise. On the one hand, it would be meaningless to do work in Norway without providing feedback to the people I have worked with and disseminating my results to the general public. On the other hand, it would be equally meaningless not to communicate with the international community of scholars and, whether we like it or not, the language of that communication is now increasingly English. In my experience, presenting work in English is more than just a translation. One has to contextualize the material for a different audience, and that process inspires new thinking. But most of all the dialogue with colleagues abroad has been crucial to my development as a scholar, and this dialogue is made possible by writing in English.

In fact, I started writing 'Kitchen-Table Society' in English even before I had ever visited Great Britain, the US or any other English-speaking country. Unlike most people in Bergen at the time, I had not even been on a shopping trip to Newcastle. My reason for writing in English was simply to be able to converse with -- and be criticized by -- new colleagues who might be interested in my kind of material. In addition I have always had the hope that discussing seemingly trivial or sensitive issues in English, a foreign language, might give Norwegian readers a productive intellectual distance to the material. At the time Norwegian anthropologists were mostly men, and I had the impression that many of them simply found the lives of young working-class women to be too trivial as a basis for anthropological analysis. When speaking to Norwegian colleagues who worked in other regions of the world about patterns of culture and social life in Norway, I often felt like a sailor's wife who was discussing the children's need for new shoes in front of a husband who was already dreaming of women in exotic ports. Even if my command of the English language was indeed far from perfect when I wrote 'Kitchen-Table Society', the strategy served me well. After finishing it, I went to the University of Chicago for two years in 1983. There I met colleagues with theoretical perspectives that helped me generalize my analyses. In particular, I was inspired by the work of David Schneider.

During this first stay in Chicago, I wrote a small book in Norwegian called *Livstil og likhet*, (Life style and equality as sameness), published in 1985, and a series of articles in English. They later became part of 'The Art of Social Relations'. In this way I have over the years produced several versions of my ideas -- in Norwegian, English and, a few times I have also dared to write in French. Moreover, some articles have been translated from English into French, Italian, German, Estonian and Portuguese. While some books is only published in Norwegian, and 'Kitchen-Table Society' only in English, both 'Everyday Life Philosophers' and 'Picturing Pity' were first written in English and then adapted into Norwegian. Most of the essays in the various collections were first written in Norwegian, others were first written in English. Often they are expanded and modified in the process of translation. Sometimes the first versions can therefore be read as drafts for the last versions. The disadvantage of this way of working is that other scholars may well cite from the first versions, not from the most elaborated ones. Since they are all published, this is a disadvantage that I just have to live with.

-- Chicago and the U.S. has been an important connection for you, but so has France. Could you expand?

Yes, I have been going back and forth to Chicago since the first stay in 1983-85. But I have also had important connections with France. When in Chicago the first time, I sent 'Kitchen-Table Society' and an article called 'Equality and marital love' to Louis Dumont, who responded warmly, and brought me in touch with Martine Segalen, with whom I have collaborated for many years. Among other things, we co-edited a book about families in Europe that appeared in French in 1995 and in English in 1997. In my various projects, I have been in touch with many French scholars -- such as family sociologist François de Singly, literary critic and expert on autobiographies, Philippe Lejeune, sociologist of literature Martine Burgos, sociologist and expert on life stories Daniel Bertaux, and sociologist and expert on racism Michel Wieviorka. In 2006 I contributed to a comparative research project on urban life at the IPRAUS, the school of architecture in Paris-Belleville. At the moment, I am looking for a French publisher for 'Picturing Pity', hoping that students and colleagues in both France and West

Africa will soon be able to read it. For me, publishing this book in French will be both a way of providing feedback to Cameroon and a way of reaching new colleagues.

- Your contacts in France indicate the interdisciplinary nature of your work. Do you think that this is something peculiar to the anthropology at home?

No, I do not think so. The traditional area studies in socio-cultural anthropology have for a long time implied cooperation among scholars representing disciplines such as anthropology, history, archeology, linguistics and so on. This cooperation is often transdisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary. Transdisciplinarity means that the scholars rest firmly in their own disciplines, while at the same time borrowing results and perspectives from other disciplines. My primary loyalty is to the empirical material I work with, to illuminate it the best I can, and not to a particular discipline. But like many other anthropologists with similar aims, I publish mostly in anthropology journals, and thus I continuously bring the results back to the discipline.

- Norwegian society prides itself on its gender equality. To what extent do you see this reflected in Norwegian ethnography?

Gender may not always be the one and only central focus of Norwegian ethnography, but I find that it is quite often an important dimension of analysis. In fact, I think that many Norwegian anthropologists have realized in practice the idea of *intersectionality*, to see gender in relation to other dimensions such as class, ethnicity, 'race', sexual orientation, age, generation and so on, and thus to see it as an empirical question whether or not gender ought to be the most central focus. In all of my projects, gender is a dimension of analysis. For example, the mission pictures in 'Picturing Pity' just cried out for an analysis in terms of gender. The missionaries have published many pictures of young, anonymous, beautiful women, symbolizing the fertile soil where it was worthwhile to sow the Word. Pictures of young boys, on the other hand, often symbolize the fruit in the form of the young Cameroonian Lutheran church.

The English version of 'Picturing Pity' came out in November 2007, and is your first book based partly on material collected outside of Norway. To what extent does it represent a break with your former interests?

It represents a break in the sense that it is not a part of Scandinavian ethnography if Scandinavian ethnography is limited to what can be found within the geopolitical region of the Scandinavian nation states. It is not a study of people in Norway, nor a study of people in Cameroon, but a study of how a protracted encounter between Norwegian missionaries and people in Northern Cameroon has been represented in Norway. It is symptomatic for the need for new categories and new perspectives that my publisher, Berghahn Books, publishes both a series on Cameroon and a series on the anthropology of Europe, but that this book fits into none of them, since it traces some of the connections between these two regions of the world.

What do you see as the main challenges for the discipline of anthropology?

I think we need to stick firmly to some traditions, and to modify others. On the one hand, we need to stick to the grounding in ethnography. In anthropology, theoretical discussions are usually best when they are closely linked to rich ethnography. Furthermore, we need to stick vehemently to *descriptive cultural relativism* as a method. Anthropologists examine the material conditions under which people live, the values they attempt to realize, as well as the justifications they present for their actions, and suspend judgment until they know more about the actors' points of view. This is a method that we need to guard intensely in the present climate of populist journalism and public reaffirmation of crude stereotypes. At the same time it is a problem if the relativism implicitly or explicitly becomes normative. We therefore need to distance ourselves equally vehemently from normative cultural relativism. All cultural practices are indeed not valuable and worth defending.

On the other hand, we need to overcome the division between anthropology 'at home' and 'abroad'. This not only means to treat all contexts with equal methodological rigor and seriousness, but also to explore the many connections between Europe and the regions of the world where anthropologists have traditionally worked. Even anthropologists who work 'abroad' need the knowledge produced 'at home', because they necessarily view other ways of life through the filter of their own. Such implicit comparisons remain unsatisfactory as long as 'our own' part of the data is taken for granted and not systematically studied. Moreover, there are important new research problems relating to the links between how the consumption of goods in the North depend on less than perfect conditions of production in the South, and how consumption patterns in the North result in climate changes affecting people in the South more badly than people in the North. In fact, I believe that the climate changes imply new and dramatic challenges to all of us, both as citizens and as anthropologists.