

ANNELISE RILES (ed.). *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Pp. 262. ISBN: 978-0-472-09945-0 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-472-06945-3 (paperback).

*Item one:* Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank Monetary Policy Statement, April 2008 (Blinder et al. 2008). At the time, Zimbabwe was suffering the worst inflationary crisis of its history and, at a staggering annual rate of 165,000 per cent, the Bank's take on the problem seemed of crucial importance. As far as documents go, central bank statements in are in a league of their own. Painstakingly studied by markets, such statements are perhaps the only source of insight as to the authority's state of mind. Monetary authorities, in turn, are aware of this fact, and use statements as yet another tool of monetary policy, consciously trying to influence expectations of future market conditions (Greenspan 2007). The premise of such interaction is the Bank's actual power to influence the market. If it is perceived as powerless, its statements will fail to influence expectations, failing thus to serve as tools for monetary policy. That seemed to be Zimbabwe's case in April 2008. The Reserve's statement seemed to have abandoned all aspiration to actually influence economic behaviour. It seemed aware that the document's relevance was not determined by its effects (which were highly unlikely) but by its very existence. Like a message in a bottle, the Statement stood alone, written in and for itself.

I recall this story as *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* appears to build on a similar premise. For the editor, documents are artifacts of modern knowledge, which can be usefully subjected to ethnographic research in and of themselves (p. 7). This is a path-breaking premise, for it expressly focuses on what Bruno Latour has called "the most despised of all ethnographic subjects" (Latour 1988: 54), and it does so with a vengeance. All articles included in the volume are quite aware of being methodologically unorthodox, thus serving the double purpose of, on the one hand, making their respective argument and, on the other and perhaps more importantly, pushing the methodological edge of ethnographic research. *Documents'* agenda opens the door for new subjects and realities to fall under the ethnographic eye. And, at a time when other disciplines turn to ethnography for answers applicable to their own fields, this is no small achievement. Two examples of this come to mind: one from economics, the second from legal studies. Consider, once again, central banks. A focus on documents in the sense proposed by Riles makes it possible to engage in ethnographic research of central banking in a significant way and, by going beyond mere insider exposés, provide some methodologically sound insight into central banks' inner working (see Holmes and Marcus 2007: 33). The same can be said of ethnographic work on property rights. Beyond the standard 'ownership relation' approach to property, a focus on documents allows new ethnographic work on property rights that, in turn, surely reaffirms ethnography's central role in globalization research (Hann 1998: 1).

### *The building blocks of reality*

Implications of this approach, though, seem to go well beyond pushing the edge of ethnographic method. Documents are often the only evidence of what Searle called 'institutional facts', that is, facts dependent on human agreement for their existence: for

example, monetary value (Searle 1995: 2)—evidence that is, in turn, a crucial element in the process whereby we, as humans, relate to that social reality. Think yet again of property, a standard institutional fact whose acquisition is performed through a document called a ‘deed’ (Zaibert 1999: 273). Consider, furthermore, the institutional fact of citizenship, and the relation we all have to our passports when abroad. Documents are instrumental for our grasp of social reality, though the latter is not dependant on the former (Searle 1995: 31). This volume’s objects of study are, in that sense, not only artifacts of ethnographic research—they are the building blocks of our perception of reality (Searle 1995: 1).

Contributions to *Documents* seem to be willing to build upon such premise. The collection’s first article, ‘Reforming Promise’ by Don Brenneis, seeks to explore documentary practices involved in funding proposals for academic projects. Weber is also the elephant in the room in Carol A. Heimer’s article, ‘Conceiving Children: How Documents Support Case versus Biographical Analysis’, that analyses hospital practices related to infants and their impact on children’s families. Heimer (Professor of Sociology, Northwestern University) starts by posing the question of identity: while a child is given, by default, an identity through her belonging to a family, that same child is the object of a different ‘hospital’ identity, when born or hospitalized. That second identity comes to being only through documentation, and is managed through it. Heimer explains such duality through a wonderful linguistic turn: “[t]he transition to a separate physical existence is marked with the creation of a separate documentary existence—a new medical record is born!” (p. 101). To be sure, the author notes, family life is also the subject of intense documentation; however, the creation of family documents (like baby books) features a looser link with their intended use, as opposed to hospital documents, where such a link is quite strong (p. 101). As a result, hospital interaction with children becomes routinized: though such interaction is not naturally routine (after all, a child in a hospital is a source of uncertainty for all parties involved), heavy regulation, standardization and documentations makes routine possible. At this point, the contrast with the infant’s identity within her family becomes once again evident: while families organize information in biographies, hospitals rely in case files. Such a dichotomy (biography/case file) grows into the central analytical tool in Heimer’s contribution. While hospitals build identities through standardized and fairly routine mechanisms, families rely on the exceptionality of their situation to build the identity of their child. One’s child is, by definition, unique—a patient, however, is not. Thus, Heimer succeeds in drawing this line without falling into unwarranted criticism of the medical profession. Medical records are artifacts for both medical professionals and parents, useful to build the identity required by both actors in a typically limit situation.

Medical records seem to share common features with documentary practices undertaken in prisons, the subject matter of Adam Reed’s article, ‘Documents Unfolding’. Reed (Department of Anthropology, University of St. Andrews) examines a particular object of ethnographic research: a cover warrant found during his field work at the Bomana jail in Papua New Guinea. From there, the article seeks to articulate interactions between wardens, prisoners and that specific kind of document. To that effect, Reed’s natural departure point is Foucault (p. 159). Documentary artifacts have a normative dimension, as they constitute identities both by producing and objectifying the subjects that use them. The warrant, though, is complemented by an ‘autograph’—a single sheet of paper, handwritten by the prisoner, intended to be a record of the individual’s life in prison. This autograph

features a contrast (much like Heimer's biography/case file dichotomy) that gives ground to the contribution's argument. Reed's choice of contrast could hardly be better. The autograph is in a format very much like the cover warrant itself, yet the information required from the prisoner is altogether different: 'favourite drink' is one of the blanks to be filled; 'most love' is another, as well as 'most fear', 'would like to see', 'would like to meet', 'worst moment', 'happiest moment', 'girls I like'. And the last one: 'revenge' (p. 162). Imagine prisoners filling out his blanks, and contrast the autograph with the formal cover warrant form, filled out by wardens and bureaucrats. It is an unsettling mind experiment. Reed skilfully drives home his point. The contrast then goes on to describe wardens' practices in filling out the cover warrant form. Abbreviations are applied, for the task is perceived as unnecessary and boring. However, the two forms are not a mechanism of colonization of prison culture. For Reed, ultimately, "the warrant cover and autograph are not tools to be exploited by competing agencies (inmate and prison authority), nor are they simply objects for conveying normative value. Instead, they are appreciated as actors, whose patterns or movement is capable of presaging the events of incarceration" (p. 176).

Documents, however, fail to tell the whole story. Bracketed information in documentary practices is the central theme of Annelise Riles' 'Deadlines: Removing the Brackets on Politics and Bureaucratic and Anthropological Analysis'. Riles (Professor of Law in Far East Legal Studies and Professor of Anthropology at Cornell) describes in this contribution her experience with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (1995) by pointing out an issue of undeniable interest: the Conference, specifically intended to address issues of gender, was concluded with a document that makes no reference at all to gender. Hence, Riles asks: "how was it possible that gender was quite literally bracketed out of the proceedings?" (p. 71). Riles' effort to provide an answer turns out to be a very enlightening piece indeed. The 1995 Conference on Women is used as the starting point to discuss, more generally, bracketing processes in ethnographic studies of bureaucracy. In that process, there are two main characters in contention: academics and bureaucrats. The first have traditionally held the dominant knowledge with regards to gender issues, which was in turn expected to prevail at the Conference. After all, gender as an international issue had risen from academic debate. This was *their* issue. Bureaucrats, in turn, had the basic goal of striking out a document that would be acceptable to most governments taking part of the Conference, a document that could but need not include a specific reference to 'gender' as a technical term. And yet, though important, the line between bureaucrats and academics is blurred by Riles. To her mind, the academic development of gender ended up serving as the starting point for bureaucratic knowledge, without fully embracing it. As a consequence, such interaction "locked them in a relationship in which it was difficult to define either in relation to the other" (p. 79). Such a lesson provides the cue for the contribution's central argument with regards the bracketing process in documentary practices. Anthropological accounts of bureaucracy bracket its own proximity to subjects like 'gender' (p. 79). Such proximity helps explain the tormented nature of ethnographic accounts of the bracketing process. Facing such a challenge, Riles proposes a turn to bureaucratic practice, to the delegates' own practice. Such practice, in turn, is focused on procedure. Negotiation processes at the Conference lacked an external reference to assess advancement. Hence, fulfilment of formal procedures was the only reference that delegates shared, in order to measure evolution of their own work. The relevance of such formal steps, though, lies,

according to the author, in an unexpected spot. When time for the Conference was running out, a sense of emergency would take over the delegates, and formal steps would have to be bypassed. Such sense of emergency would allow, at the same time, for the bracketing of issues. An agreement had to be stricken; thus, bracketing of central issues (such as 'gender') becomes possible. Through this mechanism, Riles provides an alternative to ethnographic engagement with political processes and practices, such as the Conference. The alternative is to question the distance between the observer and the subject. As the case of gender shows, the difference between the academic modality and the bureaucratic mindset may very well be the ethnographic artifact itself. As a consequence, the strategy may be to reflect on the common ground of knowledge shared with subjects of ethnographic research, instead of building a comfortable distance for observing them.

A different sort of documentary practice is bulleting, which is the focus of 'Bullet Proofing: A Tale from the United Kingdom', by Marilyn Strathern (Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge). In her contribution, Strathern reviews university mission statements as documentary practices, by arguing against the bullet format usually adopted in them.

Mario Biagioli, Professor of the History of Science at Harvard, uses a wholly different approach to documentary practices. In his 'Document of Documents: Scientist's Names and Scientific Claims', Biagioli focuses on a document's attribution and authorship. Author's names, he argues, are not simply introductory elements to the 'real' content of a document; rather, they are "crucial documents of the workings of the economy of science, of the process through which scientific documents are constituted" (p. 127).

The last essay of the volume is Hirokazu Miyazaki's (Anthropology Department at Cornell), 'Documenting the Present', which features an examination of indigenous Fijian gift-giving rituals. Such ritual commonly takes place over a period of time, as it entails a moment of waiting that Miyazaki calls a 'moment of hope' (p. 208): the gift is sent, but not yet accepted.

*Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* is not a traditional edited volume. The string holding the volume together is a notion ('documents') under which dissimilar matters, subjects and methodologies easily fit. As a result, though all contributions are, independently considered, examples of high quality scholarship, the spotlight is ultimately not on them. The collection itself and its methodological proposal get the attention. For it is the ethnographic method, in and of itself, which is the concern that informs the whole volume, as a golden thread of subtext that is, perhaps, more revealing of the collection's ultimate importance than the texts themselves. The book is certainly a pleasure to read. But *Documents* is not only a book—it is a beginning.

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RENE URUENA  
RESEARCH FELLOW  
CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE IN GLOBAL GOVERNANCE RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI  
rene.uruena@helsinki.fi