

BOOK REVIEWS

JANEJA, MANPREET K. AND ANDREAS BANDAK (eds) 2018. *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*. London: Bloomsbury. 212 pp. ISBN798-1-4742-8028-0 (Hardback), 978-1-4742-8030-3 (eBook).

What sort of an ethnographic object is waiting? What can the study of waiting reveal to a researcher? What exactly constitutes waiting, anyway? *Ethnographies of Waiting* approaches such issues from a comparative viewpoint: the volume does not set out to provide a 'theory of waiting', but rather strives to give a sense of the range of potential scenarios to be examined. Examples of such scenes are of political disillusionment, religious or lifecycle expectations, ritual attendance: the authors tackle waiting in its various forms, though all share a common view on waiting as a temporal orientation defined by hope, doubt, or other attitudes that highlight waiting as an anticipatory 'in-between' state.

Ethnographies of Waiting contains a comprehensive introduction and seven ethnographic cases followed by an afterword. The editors, Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak, introduce the volume as a pathbreaker: a set of comparative examples that anticipates and invites further studies on a ubiquitous topic which has only recently begun to attract wider attention in the social sciences. Thematically, the editors call attention to waiting both 'in its own right' and in terms of the 'social energies' triggered by waiting (p. 1). Throughout the book, these energies are in various ways identified with hope or its antitheses (particularly Bendixsen and Eriksen's chapter which states that 'Hope is the energy enabling people stuck in quicksand to hoist themselves up by the

bootstraps', or Jarrett Zigon's chapter which actually focuses on hope rather than waiting). In other words, all the authors of this edited volume approach waiting in a particular sense best understood in light of Ghassan Hage's notions of waiting *for* something and waiting *out* something (Hage 2009). Indeed, Hage's ideas are tested, specified, even moderately challenged in *Ethnographies of Waiting*, but the overall focus nonetheless remains on waiting as something to be found 'between the past and the future' (Hage, afterword to this volume). These are not ethnographies of labour reserves, of unemployment, or state-induced scenarios of bureaucratic limbo, regardless of what the book cover—a stylized waiting room with plastic chairs and a wall clock—would seem to indicate, but ethnographies of people trying to figure out how to best move on in their lives.

Herein lies both the book's strength and its weakness. Strength, because this thematic choice narrows down the issue of waiting, giving it a citeable, identifiable, and discussable frame. Weakness, because I am not wholly convinced the issue ought to be trimmed quite so neatly if the book intends to establish waiting as an object of inquiry. To paraphrase a recent comment made by Karen Sykes (or perhaps my take on it), if anthropology really is only beginning to add a whole new dimension—the temporal—into its inquiries, then we are going to need a properly broad-spectrum approach to even begin to grasp what it is we are looking at.

Hence I was left wondering about the omission of ‘clock-time’ valuation (Thompson 1967) from the analyses: the sense in which waiting can be regarded as ‘wasted’ time, independently of future hopes and fears. Only the chapter by Bendixsen and Eriksen, describing a semi-permanent demonstration held as a Palestinian ‘refugee camp’ within Oslo, directly addresses the issue. The authors do this by highlighting the contrast between the Palestinians’ imposed wait and mainstream Protestant Norway, where the vast majority of the adult population engages in wage work, and where mindfulness courses have become ‘a way of voluntarily enforcing slowness and self-awareness in a cultural world where slow time has become a scarce resource’ (p. 99). But whilst the avoidance of boredom is a recurring concern in other chapters, too, the negative value of ‘wasted’ time is only addressed in terms of doubt and uncertainty, to a point where I find myself asking why? Are such ideas completely lacking in the ethnographic instances discussed by the authors, or considered irrelevant to the matter at hand?

However, the choice to highlight the hope-centric temporal orientation also succeeds in creating coherence around a thematic core of religion and the ‘morality’ of waiting. Religion, or something like the ‘meanings’ of religious waiting, are illustrated for instance in chapters by Simon Coleman, Bruno Reinhardt, and James S. Bielo. Coleman compares the ritual temporalities of Pentecostal and Jewish worship to draw out a distinction between the future-oriented, boredom-abhorring, and impatient Pentecostalism, on the one hand, and the past-dwelling, history-retelling, and patient Judaism, on the other. Reinhardt, in contrast, discusses the Ghanaian Pentecostal-Charismatic idiom of ‘waiting for God’ to show how the

time-consuming work of waiting for God reveals a positive aspect of waiting, observable vis-à-vis the impropriety of ‘impatient Christians’. Bielo describes the waiting required prior to the construction of a creationist theme park in northern Kentucky. His point—that patience, ‘like boredom and hope, endurance and uncertainty—is yet another experiential register of waiting’ (p. 158), again underlines the key claim of the book, that waiting ‘is not an empty form of temporality’ (161).

The moral content ascribed to waiting can also be revealing in contexts of large-scale societal change, as evident for example in the chapters by Martin Demant Fredriksen and Anne Allison. Fredriksen focuses on the popularity of self-proclaimed nihilism in Georgia using Samuel Beckett’s work as a focusing device for his ethnography. He argues that the current rise in nihilism (i.e. ‘crisis of meaning and distrust in endpoints’ p. 171) is not a challenge to the Orthodox Church, as often assumed, but rather to the ‘value of political change’ as manifested in recurring utopian ideas and visions from the Soviet era to post-revolutionary neoliberal promises. Allison, for her part, depicts the Japanese ideology of ‘living actively’, which arises out of a fear of dying alone and thereby becoming a burden on the living. Allison’s focus on Japanese organisations such as the one called the ‘Ending Centre’ portrays a concern observable against current statistical trends in Japanese society, but also bespeaks of the changing nature of intergenerational responsibilities and expectations more generally.

Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty is an intriguing collection that leaves me suitably puzzled: by focusing on ‘waiting for’, the temporal orientation, rather than waiting as a mode of passing time, the ethnographic accounts in in the book do not actually contain

all that much waiting. The usefulness of studying waiting, however, is clearly brought out through a focus on the objects of waiting, on people's expectations, concerns and anxieties. And the book coheres around these issues even when I, for one, am hard pressed to say what, precisely, is the ethnography of waiting 'in its own right'. It certainly invites further reflection on the subject matter.

REFERENCES

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