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Book Review: In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments by Lotte Meinert and Bruce Kapferer

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Meinert, Lotte, and Bruce Kapferer, eds. *In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2015. vi + 180 pages. Paperback, \$27.95.

If data represent the principal currency of conventional social science, then one might say that patterns are the chief commodity. As we well know, it is usually seen as the mission of the social scientist to muster loose conglomerations of facts and figures and weave them into new generalities that inform our understanding of human beings and societies. Yet what happens when the social scientist abandons the search for the overarching and instead becomes fixated on the details? What are the implications of adopting such an approach as a fundamental principle of disciplinary theory? These are precisely the questions at work in Meinert and Kapferer's *In the Event*, which is a well-constructed anthology written by a team of eleven anthropologists from Australia and Denmark. Their work attests to the high quality of anthropological research in these two countries, but its lessons are applicable across the social sciences.

At issue in this volume is the “exploration of events and situations” (p. 1), which in most instances would form the specific data points carefully observed and recorded as part of an ethnographic field study. Events are, in other words, typically the means to an end for the anthropologist seeking to uncover new knowledge about a given culture. This volume seeks to turn that reasoning on its head by moving away from seeing specific events as “exemplary, as demonstrating general patterns . . . as illustrations” (p. 5), and towards viewing them as “central to anthropological analysis” (p. 1). In truth, such an approach is not novel, but represents an embrace of the theories of the so-called Manchester School led by the anthropologist Max Gluckman (1911-1975). While the authors do not always agree with Gluckman and his colleagues, they nevertheless similarly advocate for a more fluid notion of cultures and a renewed emphasis on the disruptive nature of events. This puts them on the forefront of contemporary social science even as it sets them at odds with traditional approaches.

Each of the book's nine chapters includes a case study that explores in depth a given event or situation and attempts to draw conclusions that either affirm or modify theories about the centrality of events in ethnography. The title of the book alludes to “generic moments,” but this strikes me as something of a misnomer. The specific events studied by the authors, which include a conflict upending the gender order in a West African village, protests over cartoon depictions of the prophet Muhammad in Denmark, and responses to natural disasters in Pakistan and Mozambique, hardly qualify as *la vie quotidienne*. Rather, one wonders whether the editors meant to say “generative moments,” which is a term the authors use several times throughout the volume to describe the events that they observed as “turning points” in the evolution of cultures (p. 48). Indeed, this lack of semantic specificity haunts the volume, as contributors struggle with such disparate terms as “event,” “case,” and “situation.” In part, this dilemma is one that the contributors inherited from theoretical forbears like Gluckman. However, it is also a problem that the authors might have set out to solve. In an especially candid moment, Bjarke Oxlund looks back on his ethnography of student politics in South Africa and concedes, “I continue to

grapple with the vague definitions of the key concepts of event, situation, case, and extended case” (p. 60). It quickly becomes clear that he is by no means alone.

Much more successful are the theoretical lessons drawn from the different projects. One of the most interesting of these concerns the relationship between events and the perception of time. In his chapter, “Ashura in Bahrain,” Thomas Fibiger reveals how the contested celebrations of the Shiite Muslim holy day of Ashura in 2008 became a ‘double event’ that united sectarian debates over an episode from the distant past with present-day social and political divides. In another instance, Stine Krøijer’s “Figurations of the Future” follows the activities of NATO protesters in Strasbourg to show how the protest can act as a ritual serving to “organize time and space” and specifically to imagine future goals as a present reality embedded in the bodies of participants (p. 147).

Looming over all of these events are the twin forces of modernization and globalization, which together provide an unspoken thematic link for this renewed examination of particular events. Globalization sometimes appears as a force disrupting the patterns of local communities. We see this in Jonas Østergaard Nielsen’s chapter, “The Outburst,” in which a group of women in a village in Burkina Faso overturn the male-dominated hierarchy following a debate over how to attract the attention of international development officials. Other examples show how global events have permanently disrupted the very concept of local culture. This is evident in Mikkel Rytter’s chapter, “Events and Effects,” which captures the response of Danish-Pakistani doctors to the devastating 2005 earthquake in Kashmir. The situation triggers an episode that Rytter refers to as “intensive transnationalism,” which “enabled Danish-Pakistani doctors to create or re-create bonds of relatedness between themselves and the people and places of Pakistan” (p. 96).

With this volume, anthropology has much in common with the discipline of history, whose own membership in the family of social sciences has been similarly complicated by its avoidance of patterns in favor of historical specificity. Like historians, the ethnographers in this collection appear to be deeply concerned with events as they are situated in specific contexts. Nielsen makes this very point when he shows how events can create “unstructured contexts” that facilitate change within a culture’s most fundamental practices (p. 85). The anthropologists also seem keenly aware not only of the difficult relationships among disparate groups within a culture, but also of the thorny interplay between past and present. To be sure, their concerns remain oriented towards the study of cultures in the here and now, but their engagement with the core principles of other social science fields like history, and their ability to step so adroitly beyond the traditions of social science in general, makes a volume such as this one especially welcome.

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