



## Review of "Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies"

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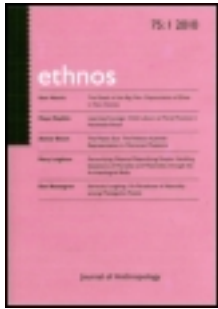
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### Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies

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# Book Review

**Mathjis Pelkmans.** 2013. *Ethnographies of Doubt: Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*. London. I.B.Tauris. 256 pp. ISBN: 1848858108

*Ethnographies of Doubt* is a thought-provoking collection of ethnographies that seeks to unravel the ways in which convictions gain and lose their force, and explore how doubts and beliefs are intertwined rather than opposites. The notion of doubt is difficult to define, as the editor Mathjis Pelkmans rightly notes in his introduction to the volume. Doubt cannot be at rest, which, for him, means that agency must be implied. Hence, 'rather than leading to inaction (although that is certainly a possibility), doubt may also be a facilitator of action by triggering a need for resolution' (p. 4). The strength of this volume resides within its focus on the question of activity. Doubt as activated uncertainty is seen in both Mette High's chapter on religious reflexivity among Mongolian gold miners, Eszter Bartha's chapter on illusion and doubt about capitalism in Hungary, Vlad Naumescu's chapter on doubt among members of an orthodox ritualist church in Romania, and in Alpa Shah's chapter on how becoming a revolutionary in India is a search for certainty rather than a question of being certain about one's convictions. Some chapters do hint towards doubt as not necessarily pushing for a resolution, such as in

Binder's chapter on spirit mediums in Taiwan, Giulia Liberatore's chapter on unanswerable questions among young Somali women in London, and, most notably, in Maurice Bloch's chapter on shared doubt among a group of Zafimaniry forest dwellers in Madagascar discussing whether trees can think. Particularly in the latter, doubt is not resolved but gains a more perpetual character, and it is intensified in discussing it.

A pertinent difficulty, Pelkmans writes, in an anthropological exploration of doubt is that it 'tends to vanish with articulation' (p. 5). This may be true in many instances, and it certainly is in most of those included in the volume, but it also masks the fact that doubt may equally emerge with language and articulation, rather than vanish with it, as Bloch's contributions show. In his chapter about suspense in retrospective ethnography, Henk Driessen notes about fieldwork that doubt during fieldwork never ends, nor do doubts about its result, which entails that retrospection may not only take away old doubts, but also create new ones (p. 160). Perhaps, then, the difficulty in studying doubt is not only that doubt dissipates with articulation, but also that it is difficult to know what remains or continues to linger *after* it has been articulated.

It is further noted in the introduction that 'disillusion cannot be an endpoint'. Yet, in experienced moments it may

very well seem so for individuals caught up in circumstances that are full of doubt as much as uncertainty, and in that sense the proposed agentic aspect of doubt might in some case be an analytical construction that does not necessarily fully capture the situation and experience of doubt at large. In her afterword, Julie McBrien equally hints at this emphasis on activity, writing that doubt is not merely an active-state-of-mind, but may just as well be an embodied and emotionally textured experience (p. 253). That doubt may lead to inactivity, and also be a bodily rather than merely reflected experience, are aspects that are not covered in the book. In this sense, there are certain gaps in the breadth of the volume: the relations between doubt and inactivity, perpetual doubt, doubt as a bodily experience, and forms of doubt which come to life through language (rather than being solved through language) are left outside the scope of the book. There is reason to believe that an examination of doubt – and particularly the characterizations of doubt provided in the introduction – would have looked much different had it also focused on agnostics or even atheists rather than on believers. The introduction in this relation very convincingly captures what is at stake in chapters dealing with religious or ideological doubt, but not quite what is at stake in those that do not (chapters by Bloch and Driessen) – a different, more perpetual, form of doubt seem to emerge in these cases and they provide interesting counterpoints to the other chapters.

Perhaps the categorizations of doubt outlined in the introduction should have been a bit less assertive, and in a sense more doubtful itself, if this facet was to be conveyed.

This however may only testify to the originality of the volume in that it covers a theme that has been largely unexplored within anthropology. There are no weak chapters in this volume and collectively they highlight the centrality of doubt in everyday life, not least in situations marked by what may at first appear as firm ideological or religious convictions. One of the great merits of the volume is thus that it portrays a series of very different contexts in which doubts emerge, the individual and social processes that come to life because of it, and the endeavours that are undertaken in order to deal with it. In this sense, the book provides an important vantage point to examine a concept that has been the focus of much attention in both philosophy and theology, but which has not yet – or not until this volume – been considered in an ethnographic perspective. The book will thus be of interest to scholars of religion and atheism, faith and uncertainty, alike, and it provides a useful vantage point to explore further the theme of doubt from new angles and in new contexts.

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