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Anthropology Book Forum

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What an Event Does/Is (and What Does/Is Not)

Review by Marcelo González Gálvez

In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments

by Lotte Meinert & Bruce Kapferer (eds)

Berghahn Books, 2015

It has been a while since anthropology gave center stage to the debate on what the focus of its observations should be. Socio-cultural transformations, shifts in theoretical paradigms, and the crisis of representation, to name but a few, are among the reasons for this loss of relevance. *In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments* is a collective effort aiming to help this debate recover its former position through a renewed reading of the School of Manchester's (and fundamentally Max Gluckman's) proposals, illuminated by contemporary philosophy and present-day social phenomena.

The key contribution that *In the Event* puts forward is an analytical discussion on what an event implies. In doing this, the contributors argue against considering events as mere illustrations of more general social issues, and thus as accessories – or adornments – of anthropological descriptions, positioning them instead as the axis of ethnographic analysis. Contributors build on Gluckman's situational analysis in order to argue that events are critical circumstances that somehow produce some sort of spatio-temporal suspension, evidencing the social tensions existing in the contexts (between social balance and change) and being the source of multiple further potentialities that derive from the event itself. In this way, the contributors respect one of the main premises Gluckman puts forward in order to criticize the stasis of structural-functionalism: stability in social life does not have to do with the shape a society may take, but with its perpetual fluidity and instability. From there, the contributors combine detailed ethnographic descriptions with sophisticated theoretical discussions in order to demonstrate the importance of thinking carefully about what an event could include, generate and do.

The introductory piece, by Bruce Kapferer, magisterially summarizes the role that events have assumed – first through the School of Manchester, later through a series of different scholars – in giving anthropology a livelier sense of what we loosely label as ‘society’. Sharing, in fact, a critical view on the idea of ‘society’ as an integrated whole, Kapferer shows how these different perspectives have historically employed the notion of event to underline dissonances over consensus, and multiplicity over singularity. Discussing perspectives on events’ potential long-term effects, on how they become historical memory or how they are creative instances, Kapferer points out that events consistently manifest contradictory principles, and are thus usually much more disturbing than functional in the social contexts where (and when) they occur. While doing this, he draws an outline of a general framework to understand events, beyond the specificity characterizing each one of them.

The different articles comprising the volume are specific analysis of different events, which in turn could be comprehended as ongoing events in themselves, and whose reading may bear the potential of generative action on the thoughts of their readers. The first article, by Thomas Fibiger, is an insightful illustration of the intersection between an event and the memory of it, and further, of how the remembrance of the event may become an event in itself. Focusing in ‘Ashura, the commemoration of the death of Iman Husayn in Karbala, by the Shi’I Muslims of Bahrain, Fibinger challenges the boundaries between the past and the present, religion and politics, and the anthropological distinction between *emic* and *etic*, revealing the complexity of trying to express a complete image of the commemoration. By focusing on the analysis locals themselves make of their participation in the event, this paper discusses a unitary interpretation of it by vividly manifesting its fragmentary nature, expressing myriads of different understandings of the situation and of the rationalities taking a part in it.

In a similar vein, Bjarke Oxlund devotes his chapter to explore the multiple tensions and ambiguities encapsulated in an event taking place as a celebration of an electoral victory in a contemporary South African university. While doing this, he shows how the event manifests temporal bonds, encapsulating a long history of ethnic tensions that goes beyond the sequential distinction between pre- and post-apartheid eras, and making explicit the configuration of current South African interethnic relations, in an interesting connection to Gluckman’s classic piece on the building of a bridge in Zululand (1940). From there he concludes that, far away from merely expressing these tensions, the event is a productive instance that shows the processual nature of social life, and the creative agency of the people involved

in it.

In the third chapter, Jesper Oestergaard makes an interesting argument by combining elements of skill, landscape, cosmology, and memory. This article, which connects to the previous chapters in terms of the importance granted to the biographic elements in the construing of an event, attempts to describe the process of an anthropological approach to the perceptions of a Buddhist lama, who is able to distinguish the traces left by a mythological figure in a cave of western Nepal. While doing this, Oestergaard is able to conceptualize every encounter as an event – the encounters between the lama and himself, between the lama and the traces – showing how they give birth to one meaningful world from what previously were worlds apart. This happens as well with the encounter between geography and mythology, which ‘creates’ the sacred place where the guru and the pilgrims also meet. From there he proposes that encounters do not involve two or more parts trying to discover meaning, but trying to construct it instead in their mutual engagement.

Shifting the focus from the local implications of events to how they also express transnational connections, in the fourth chapter, Jonas Østergaard Nielsen discusses the impacts climate change has had on a small village on northern Burkina Faso. Explaining how people there have coped with weather variability employing a diversified economic strategy, it centres on how, since the 1970s, the appearance of international development projects has become the major strategy to do so. More specifically, the article focuses on the consequences of one specific event: the arrival of an international development expert. In doing this, it shows how the event suspends identities and statuses, which can be negotiated and reconstructed throughout its duration. This is especially critical, in this case study, regarding the dialectical construction of gender relations.

In the Event's fifth chapter, by Mikkel Rytter, is also an exploration on how an event may make transnational connections evident. Focusing on a devastating earthquake that affected northern Pakistan in 2005, Rytter shows the effects this catastrophe produced worldwide, and in Denmark specifically, through the Pakistani migrants' expression of an ‘intensive transnationalism’. The main effect this paper focuses on is the establishment of a medical organization aiming to help earthquake survivors. In doing so, Rytter is not only able to show global connections in motion, but also the ethnic tensions existing in the core of Danish society.

In the sixth article, Anja Kublitz focuses her analysis on the massive pro-Muslim demonstrations

generated by the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper. In this context, the author shows how both events, the publication of the cartoons and the demonstrations, serve as creative instances allowing, on the one hand, the reconstruction of the hegemonic discourses on migrants, and on the other, the emergence of a context of Muslim union to fight against those hegemonic discourses. From her analysis, Kublitz proposes an interesting argument of how events may trigger changes at certain levels, but may leave others untouched, specifically referring to structural relations between the Danish and the so-called minorities.

Later, in the seventh chapter, Jakob Krause-Jensen attempts to prove the adequacy of Gluckman's analysis to the study of modern corporations, exemplified by a company producing home electronics for the global elite. Doing this, Krause-Jensen sets up his analysis from a small meeting – the event – and engages with discussions previously addressed in the book, concerning transnational connections and the ambiguity of social relations, focusing primarily on how the corporation 'discovers' – and does not 'create' – the core values of its 'culture'.

In the Event's last two chapters return to the initial emphasis on local articulations over transnational connections. Chapter eight, by Stine Krøijer, focuses on radical left protests in the context of NATO's sixtieth anniversary to propose a view of them as performances that somehow work as temporal incarnations of an alternative future. In doing this, instead of working on how the protest – as a ritual – creates a *collective consciousness*, following the classic lead opened by Durkheim, Krøijer focuses on the emergence of synchronicity and bodily affect that allows the appearance of another time in the present. In this sense, she draws on Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* (1997), which considering the integrative role of ritual also underlines the transformative potential of liminal periods.

In the last chapter, Morten Nielsen also examines the ruptures produced by the emergence of 'possible futures', starting from devastating floods that affected Mozambique in 2000. In a remarkable exploration that could be extremely fruitful concerning debates on structure and agency, Nielsen shows how confronting the incapacity of the state to fulfil their needs, people take an urbanization project in their own hands but deciding to respect the state's urbanization regulations. Following this argument, the author is also able to manifest the spatial and temporal connections produced by the flooding, and how the imitation of the state concedes legitimacy to the occupancy of the newly urbanized terrains, everything allowed by the generative capacity of the original event.

In general terms, *In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments* accomplishes several goals that make it a book extremely worth reading. For a start, it is an excellent introduction to the contemporary validity of the Manchester School, particularly in terms of the exploration concerning the question of what an event is and does. Furthermore, and following from this, the various contributions to this volume show a very thought provoking argument, inspired by Deleuze (2002): the event is the seed to change, to multiplicity, to the unexpected, rather than merely the illustration of something that already exists. Finally, every chapter of this book manifests something that is becoming increasingly evident for all of us: the translocal connections made visible by the occurrence of events. Although it is essential that we consider what makes an event actually something particular (i.e., the place and time of its occurrence), we have to be aware that its occurrence may produce and activate global effects that cannot even be imagined by the direct participants of the event. Isn't the fact that an anthropologist based in Chile is writing the review of this book, concerning events located mainly in Europe and Africa, a perfect example for this claim?

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