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Book Reviews

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Book details:

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In the meantime: toward an anthropology of the possible

Berghahn Book

2023

Review by: Dr Terry, SH Au-Yeung (OCID: 0000-0003-2540-7811)

Dr Terry, SH Au-Yeung is *Research Associate* for the ESRC-funded Open Research Area Round 7 Visions of Policing at Cardiff University. He is intrigued by the ability of society members to understand and coordinate multi-layered temporalities in face-to-face interactions. Now a migrant in the United Kingdom, he is expanding his interest in the sociology of time to study migration and morality in a multicultural society.

Time is a stream of overlapping moments stretching between reminisces in the past and anticipation of the future. Often, in these lapses of present we have a good idea about what kind of time we are living through, in terms of the *tempo*s of urban life. Today is a workday, a day many of us are disciplined to work. I'm currently fulfilling my job responsibilities by typing this review in my university office, hopefully also contributing some value to society. Socialised by the productivism of capitalist society and the surge of motivational literature, we seek meaning and try to be meaningful in every moment. Any time in between meaningful activities are deemed as idle, meaningless, wasteful, or even sinful, echoing the Latin phrase *labor omnia vincit* (translated as: labour conquer everything).

Adeline Masquelier and Deborah Durham's edited collection *In the meantime: toward an anthropology of the possible* suggests otherwise, through a series of captivating ethnographies. In the "slow time" reading the book, readers are guided to different *fadas* across space, from Ordos in China's Inner Mongolia to Puerto Viejo on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. And from chapter to chapter, they leap from the meantime in which the Western Sahrawi are stranded struggling to decolonise their land since 1970s, to the meantime of paranormal natural researchers voluntarily and routinely waiting for their ephemeral encounters. In these *fadas* (social sites in Hausa language) life goes on filling the seemingly voids of time. As Masquelier has argued in his other book *Fada* (2019), waiting can be sticking and frustrating, but it is also the liminal space of life brimming with possibility.

In a meantime, no meaning of that time is readily available. It does not fit into some existing temporalities, e.g., narrative about urban development or stage of life, and hence it predicates no *a priori* norms about what one should do in it. Some just wish to get past the meantime and resume their *ferenda*, the futures as it should be. Such sentiments are evident in Kwon's chapter about the Korean Chinese intuitively trapped in China's borderland waiting for a

return to work in Korea. Other may take advantage of their meantime, a gap from the *ferenda*, to craft novel meanings, illustrated by Drury's chapter describing people repurposing unfinished buildings in Ordos, highlighting the materiality of that potential. The different ways of living it shows the liminality of a meantime, a time where uncertainty, unsettledness, anxiety, or even despair co-exist with potential, possibility, and maybe hope.

The creation of this book partly coincided with the historical meantime, COVID-19 pandemic, undeniably influencing its final form, as acknowledged by the editors from the outset. Perhaps that is why they sidestep value relativism, not eroticising the life in waiting and acknowledging the coexistence of potentials and challenges in it. Consecutive lockdowns, pandemic measures, and our fear of their own health abruptly shift the humanity into a pause. Yet, some found moments of introspection, reshaping their relationships with societal *tempos* (Lily Rothman, 2023) while they took a break from the hyper-compressed time-space during lockdowns. A central message the book makes, I think, waiting is an indispensable part of our life alone or collectively, and more than homogeneous nothingness, offering a rich subject for anthropologists and sociologists to study.

For sociologists, the book underscores the distinction between societal time—both past and present—and the lived experiences of individuals within society. This distinction is even more pronounced in our era of divergent and fragmented realities, where individuals' perceptions are heavily influenced by their unique bubbles within the social and media landscape. While certain overarching themes from traditional sociology—such as progress, globalisation, and decolonisation—remain pertinent, their applicability as a broad lens for understanding individual experiences diminishes. This is demonstrated by the two Korean Chinese migrant workers in Chapter 1 who, despite being subject to the same immigration policies and having similar socio-economic backgrounds, interpreted their time spent at home in distinct ways.

In the Meantime artfully navigates these complexities refraining from making definitive judgments about how these temporalities shape individuals living their meantime. Just like the title of this book, the overarching narrative of the book presents a possibility. That is—sociology need not to be a form of studies depicting “the social” as grand processes and structures of the majority, where people are simply cultural dopes (Garfinkel, 2019) with no hope to escape. But it can be a form of heuristic inquiry that uncovering the crack in social lives and facilitate the imagination of new forms of living to emerge. For this end, waiting could be a fertile deadland for life.

Garfinkel, H. (2019). *Harold Garfinkel: Parsons' Primer*. J.B. Metzler.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-04815-8>

Lily Rothman. (2023, March 7). *Our Relationship With Time Is Changing—Maybe for the Better*. Time. <https://time.com/6260618/pandemic-relationship-with-time/>

Masquelier, A. M. (2019). *Fada: Boredom and belonging in Niger*. The University of Chicago Press Chicago.