

Rethinking Ethnography through ‘the Event’

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E*vent and Everyday: Empiricisms and Epistemologies*, an edited volume by Yasmeeen Arif, makes a significant intervention in the field of ethnographic studies by foregrounding the “event” as a central methodological tool. It is a product of classroom discussions, spread over 15 years, and the contributors are students who were part of these discussions and related research exercises.

Event as Method: Theoretical Underpinnings

The book proposes the event as a methodological device to capture and understand the contemporary social. While employing event as a method has already been an established practice in sociological and anthropological academic endeavours, Arif posits a different framework. Drawing heavily from Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, this framework, as outlined in the introductory essay, is structured around four analytical components:

(i) **Foucault’s ‘eventalisation’**: This primarily relates to visibilising the singularity of a phenomenon by

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uncovering its multiple aspects, which, in Foucault’s words, “can never properly be taken as finite” (p 21). An important component of this idea, and that forms the foundational premise of Arif’s formulation of event as method, is “fracture of the regime of self-evidence,” a “loosening of the hold of a constant concept.” In simpler terms, the Foucauldian concept of “eventalisation” is an appeal towards unveiling the singularity of a phenomenon (here the event) by visibilising its diverse (potentially infinite) facets, thereby opening the door towards “breaching” existing theories, concepts, meta-narratives, and universal categories.

(ii) **Deleuze’s ‘critical sites of emergence’**: This perspective approaches event as a creative potential that becomes visible and knowable as it unfolds. The diverse actualisations of the event, thus, make way for the expansion of existing interpretations and concepts as

well as invention of newer ones. Taken together, the Foucauldian and Deleuzian ideas of the event call for an analytic that focuses on: the singularity of events, uncovering its multiple facets and actualisations; and tests the adequacy of the extant concept and theories, making way for newer concepts.

(iii) **The ‘event of afterlife’**: Aligned with the Deleuzian idea of creative potential, Arif devises this framework to engage with the life of an event that exceeds beyond its immediate occurrence. Arif argues that the continuing life of an event that gets embodied in people’s memory, institutions and everyday life, helps capture the “transcendental concept” in the diverse recurrence of an event.

(iv) **Veena Das on the entanglement of the event and everyday**: An important component of Arif’s employment of the event as a methodological device is to engage with the inextricable linkage between the event and everyday. This approach problematises the presumed distinctness of the two. In other words, while the everyday encapsulates within it the extraordinariness of the event, the event remains immersed in the ordinarieness of the everyday.

Apart from the introductory essay, discussed above, the volume has 11 chapters that weave a rich tapestry of diverse themes. One may always point out that some themes were left out, but that would

be unnecessarily ambitious. The themes that the book chooses to engage with are not only diverse, but deeply relevant.

Unlike the book's title, *Event and Everyday: Empiricisms and Epistemologies*, the book's blurb on the inner cover, and Arif's claim in the introduction (that each chapter reveals "the intricacy of the event-everyday dynamic" [p 40]), not all chapters engage with the dynamics of event-everyday relationship. I therefore divide the following discussion into two parts: the first discusses chapters that dwell on the event-everyday entanglement and the next one reviews the chapters that deal solely with the event.

Event-everyday Interplay

The book contains six significant pieces that deal with the event-everyday paradigm. Since the book is dedicated to Veena Das, whose oeuvre dives deeply into the event-everyday dynamics, these chapters remain closest to the book's thematic scope. We may begin with Chapter 2, which weaves an intricate analysis of the interplay between the event—the exodus of Tibetans to India as refugees—and the everyday—the layered process of remembering, forgetting, creative potentialities of building lives, repair and identity. It employs Das's conception of the "eventual-everyday" and Arif's paradigm of the "event-afterlife" to understand the experiential reality of Tibetan refugees in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh across three generations.

Similarly, Chapter 4 reimagines the spatial landscape of Downtown Srinagar of the 1990s to understand how the extraordinary—Kashmir's insurgency—interweaves with the everyday in memory, survival and endurance. It invokes the concept of palimpsest to capture the overlap of present and future over the past. It is an excellent essay except for one minor oversight—although it mentions engagement with three ethnographic accounts, it actually discusses only two. Chapter 10 offers another compelling engagement with the event-everyday interplay. It explores dengue outbreaks in Delhi and scrutinises the intricate relationship between these outbreaks and the everyday living with mosquitoes. The essay's thoughtful analysis of

"human-mosquito entanglement" provides an insightful lens to revisit the popular belief that a mosquito-free everyday is possible through human efforts.

Chapters 7, 9 and 11 again delve deeply into the event-everyday dialectic and explore the themes of the 2014 floods in Kashmir, land reforms in Bihar and water scarcity in Delhi occasioned by the 2016 Jat agitation. Notwithstanding the remarkable exposition of their themes, there are a few critical observations that warrant discussion. In Chapter 7, the author employs the Foucauldian analytic of "problematisation" to "breach" the existing "self-evident knowledge systems" on Kashmir that focus primarily on "cause and effects of various wars, dialogues and effects of militarization" (p 171). Instead, the author chooses to foreground "creative emergences" comprised of the diverse techniques of resilience and camaraderie during the flood.

I have three points of critique and here I also return to Foucault's concept of eventalisation. While undeniably the stories of resilience and camaraderie in times of crisis are important and need uncovering and retelling, other aspects that look at causal relationships cannot be dismissed as mere "self-evident knowledge systems." Needless to mention that the supposed "self-evident knowledge systems" emerged from similar endeavour of critical research that the present author engages with. Second, an uncritical application of the idea of problematisation tends to create a hierarchy of knowledge systems, where some (the existing ones) are considered less useful/insightful while the newer ones are elevated to a higher pedestal. Third, should the new portrayal that the author puts forth be seen as a "breach"/"destabilisation" of "self-evident knowledge systems" or simply an addition to existing knowledge, with which most critical research engages?

Moving on to Chapter 9, it compellingly problematises the naturalised link between law and its promise of justice and redirects our attention to "the play of law itself." However, this approach tends to assign the role of the primary agent to the law and also lends it an autonomous character, thus abstracting the "play" from material realities.

Chapter 11 explores the notion of "scarcity" and engages with diverse themes associated with water scarcity—from the creative alternatives devised by people in their everyday to the concepts of technical, infrastructure and vulnerability. But, it also invokes several scholars and their philosophical concepts, without adequately explaining them and establishing a clear linkage with the chapter's main arguments. For instance, the notion of "things" appears as a jumble of the ideas of Foucault, Machiavelli, La Perriere, Heidegger, Verbeek and Jaspers.

Chapters 3 and 5 take this ambiguity to an extreme with their theoretically loaded, jargon-heavy language. Both take up interesting themes and claim to explore the event-everyday entanglement. However, the analysis and arguments are rendered vague and abstract amidst dense language and extreme theorisation. For instance, in Chapter 3, the only empirical data is a conversation during a cab ride, which covers less than three paragraphs. The rest of the chapter reads as a medley of several scholars, their philosophies and concepts, without sufficient unpacking or synthesis. Similarly, Chapter 5 takes up a novel theme of online flamewars around a comedy show—AIB Knockout—and how it enters the everyday memory and vocabulary, focusing more on the event and relegates everyday to the background. Further, the central arguments remain obscured behind over-packed syntax and heavy name-dropping of scholars. For instance, the employment of terms like "example," "exemplar," "exemplum," without patiently pausing to unpack them and connecting them to the main arguments, leaves the reader asking: "What is being argued beyond the layering of terms?"

Analytic of the Event and Knowing the Social

Chapters 6, 8 and 12 do not engage with the everyday. Yet, these chapters foreground the novel conceptual terrains and provide significant insights into the analytic of the event. Chapter 6 takes the readers on a remarkable journey of how an occurrence gets "eventalised," elicits public outrage and sympathy and political response. The occurrence is the

powerful image of the body of a refugee child, Alan Kurdi, who was washed ashore in the Mediterranean in 2015. The chapter intricately weaves the diverse responses and representations linked to the image and works through a range of conceptual frameworks: politics of pity, visual of an uncared dead body, idea of belatedness, children's political innocence and Barthes' concept of "punctum." Chapter 8, again, offers a fresh perspective on the idea of the event: it explores famine both as an empirical event and as a concept, labelling it "famine-event." It looks at multiple representations and meanings that it generated and how diverse interpretations enabled certain responses while foreclosed others.

The last chapter engages with an intellectually ambitious theme: it seeks to explore ethnography itself as an object of inquiry and argues that both ethnography and the ethnographic object are always in the process of "becoming" or "objects of emergence." This exercise, however, like few other chapters discussed above, gets drowned in abstract theorisation, reluctance to connect heavy concepts to the empirical, and obscure, periphrastic writing style. The opaque language fails to clearly put forth whether the idea of becoming proposes a new paradigm. Needless to mention, the notion of a phenomenon being contingent and temporally shaped is a well-established understanding in all critical social science research. The author falls short of establishing in clear terms how the idea of becoming goes beyond this existing framework. Further, although the author claims to engage with both ethnography as well as the ethnographic object as objects of emergence, the discussion predominantly focuses on the latter, the object. Moreover, the author hardly dwells on how ethnography as a method interacts with or constitutes the ethnographic object.

Conclusions

The book places the event as a methodological practice on firmer grounds within anthropological studies. With several remarkable pieces, it not only dwells intricately on the rigour of employing event as an analytic to comprehend the contemporary social, but also underscores

the event-everyday entanglement with nuance. Notwithstanding its contribution towards the theoretical and methodological realm of ethnography, the book has its share of limitations. Some critical observations have already been made in the above section. To sum up, I would briefly present a few additional points of critique that emerge as we read the chapters together with the conceptual framework laid out in the introduction.

Scepticism towards existing concepts and a desire towards "breaching" them and devising newer concepts seem discernible in both the introduction and many of the chapters. As we read Arif's exposition in the introduction, the most emphatic argument centres on "expansion as well as discovery and invention of concepts" (p 16). While the author also briefly pauses to caution against excessive proliferation of newer concepts, the argument that dominates the discussion emphasises the "singularity" of events, identifying "new motifs" in each episode of an event, and, to quote Arif, "literal loosening of the hold of a constant concept, of cause and effect, of self-evident theory in order to make possible other connections, interpretations, concepts and theorizing" (p 25). This persuasive argumentation in favour of breaching the old concepts and inventing new ones runs the risk of: radical fragmentation of reality and extreme relativism; and downplaying relational and comparative analysis, that is, the academic rigour involved in identifying patterns and connections. Several anthropologists and scholars (Wolf 1980; Ortner 1984; Eco 1992; Kalb and Tak 2005) have unambiguously cautioned against these risks of fragmentation, disjunction and overinterpretation.

Furthermore, working predominantly within a post-structuralist framework, the book employs discursive and interpretive methods through an engagement with narrative forms, memory, and experiences. While such interpretations are undeniably crucial, they tend to flatten causal relationships and linkages with material realities. This makes the overall endeavour of the book to establish the event as a method one-sided: an event is brought into existence only through creative emergences, while its causality and materiality are rendered completely immaterial.

The writing style of some chapters is dense and abstract. While this is not a new critique of post-structuralist writings and several scholars have pointed this out earlier (axisaudio 2009; Chibber 2013), I would limit myself to noting that the contributors have not paid heed to their editor's exhortation:

The challenge has always been to find a technique that can blend concept and description ... so that neither atonal concept nor noisy description throttles the sound of the social. (p 5)

I would conclude this review by attempting to briefly answer a crucial question posed by Arif while closing her exposition on the book's conceptual foundations:

If theory has already explained everything in the world as we observe it, if concept has already been mastered, then why conduct new research? (p 35)

This question is based on a problematic premise. It tends to confine the significance of research to inventing new theories and concepts, thus carrying a subtle tone of dismissal for research that works within existing theoretical frameworks. While it is always desirable to craft new concepts and theories to explain what has been overlooked or misinterpreted, conflating the significance of research solely with theoretical innovations renders inconsequential such research practices that focus on empirical work, testing and refining theories, applying existing concepts to newer terrains or simply documentation exercises.

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