Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

João Biehl, Byron Good and Arthur Kleinman (eds.), *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, 477 pages.

Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Sandra Teresa Hyde, Sarah Pinto and Byron J. Good (eds.), *Postcolonial Disorders.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 480 pages.

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Disturbing Subjects

Despite their different titles, these two collections share a common origin and a common central concern. The origin was a series of papers and discussions that took place at the "Friday Morning Seminar" of Harvard University's Medical Anthropology Program in 1999-2001. Their concern is subjectivity, broadly understood, but this word barely hints at the breadth and depth of questions they engage with. These are "big" questions in every sense of the word. "What constitutes modernity and modern subjectivity?" ask the editors of *Subjectivity.* How did colonialism shape European and North American subjectivities? What cultural paths do emergent forms of subjectivity take in non-Western and post-colonial societies? What does the anthropology of the contemporary world entail? These questions drive both volumes, albeit in somewhat different ways.

The questions are hardly new. Indeed, in one way or another they have been at the heart of an extensive theoretical literature in philosophy, semiotics, psychoanalysis and literary theory over the past thirty years. In a more modest way, medical anthropologists have also been preoccupied with subjectivity as it appears in "the illness experience," "illness narratives" and illness and healing as sites for the negotiation of personal and cultural meanings. The problem, as *Subjectivity's* editors note, is the gulf between these two discursive worlds. On the one hand, theorizing about subjectivity, with its endless talk of discursive forms and subject positions, is all too often "overstated, obscure and even dehumanizing" (p. 13). On the other, writing about illness experience has often had "a generalist quality" that is conceptually thin and fails to address "central theoretical concerns about the fractured nature of subjectivity [and] the ways in which persons are constituted through social experience" (p. 13).

The papers collected in these volumes seek to bridge this gulf, bringing ethnographic data on illness, suffering and care into conversation with diverse theories about subjectivity and its transformations in the West and the developing world. Given their particular focus, it is no surprise that both volumes draw their theoretical inspiration less from the anthropological canon than from writers like Freud, Benjamin, Lacan, Zizek, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva, Fanon, Bhaba and others whose ideas have done much to shape current debates on this topic. It is in their framing of the conversation between theory and ethnography, however, that the two volumes take up different agendas. *Subjectivity* draws most (though scarcely all) of its case materials from Western settings (cancer wards and palliative care units, mental hospitals, the streets inhabited by the homeless) while engaging theories of the subject drawn mainly from philosophy, critical theory and psychoanalysis. *Postcolonial Disorders*, as might be guessed, looks more directly to the developing world and to postcolonial theory as embodied in the work of Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhaba, Ashis Nandy and others. The result, overall, is two very stimulating collections. While the essays in both vary in their degree of attention to theory as opposed to ethnography, many succeed in joining the two in subtle and imaginative ways. Since I cannot begin to summarize all this work here, I will instead highlight a few essays in each that stand out in speaking to one another or converging on central themes.

One such theme in *Subjectivity* involves the relationship between the subject in general and its various local incarnations. Does it even make sense to speak of a subject in general? If not, then are human subjects mere products of culture and circumstance? Is there anything special about the particular kind of subject that appears with the rise of modernity? In her lucid contribution, philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty argues that the much-discussed "modern subject" is not one kind of subject at all, but a tense amalgam fusing "distinctive archeological layers of meaning" (p. 34). Behind it lies a long history of differing conceptions stretching from Aristotle and Augustine through Loyola and Descartes to Sartre and Freud.

Though hidden at times, that history continues to shape our thinking today. It remains very much alive, for example, in current debates between physicians and anthropologists about science and the authority of personal experience.

Writing from a very different perspective, Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry also oppose a universalist view of the subject, especially as championed by psychologists and cognitive scientists. But whereas Rorty attends to the diversity of our theories and their continuity over time, Kleinman and Fitz-Henry call attention to the profound differences in our experience of self that arise from shifting social contexts. "As our world changes, so do we," they say. They draw their examples from the history of political violence, ranging from the Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide, but perhaps surprisingly, they do not conclude that such horrific events demonstrate that people are capable of anything. What they emphasize instead is the uniqueness of each case and the complexity of individual responses. Far from making the case for social determinism, these events, when closely examined, point to a "dialectic of intersubjectivity" in which "the subjective is always social, and the social, subjective" (p. 64).

Questions about the pan-human subject and the special status of its modern variant in the West return in two essays toward the end of *Subjectivity*. In the first of these, Evelyn Fox Keller critiques the postmodern relativism that views subjectivity as entirely a product of discourse and context, unanchored to any enduring phenomenological core. Following the work of Simon Baron-Cohen, she finds that core in our ability to "read" the thoughts of others from their words and actions and thus to read our own thoughts as well. Given the central importance of this ability, she argues, there is a real danger in currently fashionable reductionist views that elide the role of intentionality. To the extent that we think of our inner states as the product of genes, receptors or computer modules, she asks, "are not all personal pronouns at risk of merging into a single, impersonal 'it'?" (p. 359).

In the second essay, Eric L. Krakauer takes up a related concern, but his target is a pervasive mode of thinking that has come to define the scientific worldview. Drawing on a critique first formulated by Heidegger, Krakauer argues that post-Cartesian science posits the whole world of experience as a series of objects to be known and mastered by a thinking subject, typically through measurement and calculation. To take this stance, however, is to miss or marginalize all those aspects of human experience that defy measurement or mastery, in particular the capacity for suffering. This failure becomes especially acute when medical science meets terminal illness, and mastery is out of the question. Here, another way of knowing is needed, a compassionate "being with" the suffering of another person, which has become the basis of palliative care.

Balancing these theoretically oriented contributions to *Subjectivity* are a series of more richly ethnographic chapters—for example, Veena Das and Ranendra K. Das on illness and the lifeworld of Delhi's urban poor, or Nancy Scheper-Hughes on the politics of remorse in post-apartheid South Africa, or João Biehl on the struggles of an abandoned invalid woman in southern Brazil. These make compelling reading and stand up well in their own right—indeed, some might fit as readily into collections with an entirely different focus. Seen in the context of this volume, however, they add weight and substance to the proposition that "the subjective is always social, and the social, subjective" (p. 64) as it plays out under the extremities of poverty, marginalization or civil strife.

A few contributions to *Subjectivity* do succeed in squaring the circle, marshalling robust ethnography in ways that yield important theoretical insights. Two of these struck me as especially interesting. The first, by Allan Young, examines the origins and history of a curious late 20th-century psychiatric disorder, "the self-traumatized perpetrator," which Young, following Ian Hacking, describes as a "transient mental illness"—an illness that is the creature of a certain time and place (p. 155). Drawing on news reports, interviews and the psychiatric literature on trauma in the period just after the Vietnam War, Young documents the convergence of political forces in both psychiatry and U.S. domestic politics that led to the creation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and then "the self-traumatized perpetrator" as its paradoxical subtype. He shows how this category came to be inhabited, first by soldiers who had actually committed atrocities and later by imitators—"factitious self-traumatized perpetrators" (p. 162)—who had never been near a war zone. The story he tells is fascinating in it own right, but also a vivid demonstration of how new subjective possibilities can emerge from a changing political environment.

In a second contribution with even broader ramifications, Ellen Corin probes a distinctive way of experiencing the world that she finds among schizophrenics in widely disparate social settings. At the core of this experience is an irreducible sense of strangeness, or "Otherness", as she calls it, that prompts an endless quest for meaning even as it defies all available cultural answers. Drawing on extensive interviews with schizophrenics in Montreal and India as well as examples from her own practice as a psychoanalyst, Corin details the phenomenology of this experience, looking especially at how schizophrenics "borrow, displace and transform cultural signifiers" in an attempt to "articulate experience that essentially eludes communication and mastery" (p. 276). Her work shows that religious symbols and practices are often central to this process, in part because they offer "a way of introducing Otherness and strangeness into language and culture," but also because they facilitate "positive withdrawal"—a self-chosen way of being on the edges of the social (p. 288). In her rich and complex discussion based on nearly three decades of research, Corin offers a major advance on long-standing debates about the relationship between schizophrenia and culture.

The essays in *Postcolonial Disorders* are more uniformly ethnographic than those in *Subjectivity*, but this makes them even harder to summarize. Moreover, as the editors tell us, "they are an unruly lot, more provocative than prescriptive,

opening up issues rather than providing closure, hinting at the hidden, at times intentionally subversive" (p. 29). The title says something about their common direction. "Postcolonial" can mean many things—a phase of history, a kind of psychology, a mode of power—but the editors construe it broadly "to indicate a legacy of violence and appropriation, carried into the present as traumatic memory, inherited institutional structures and often unexamined assumptions" (p. 6). "Disorders" says more about what is distinctive in this work, since it involves a play on words that fuses political with psychological distress. The essays in the first section ("Disordered States") take up this psycho-political link directly, but it is a theme that winds its way through much of the book.

Sometimes, we learn, the seeming madness of marginalized persons can open a space for social and political commentary. Jamie Saris offers one vivid example in his ethnography of an Irish village as seen through the lens of one "Tomàs O'Connor," a wandering ex-mental patient and local "character." Tomàs is notorious for the habit of accosting and lecturing "respectable" persons in public places, usually at length and in socially inappropriate ways. While psychiatrists might view the stranger aspects of his conduct as mere pathology, Saris shows that it is very much in keeping with traditional ideas about the role of marginal persons as social critics in rural Ireland. On many occasions his outbursts articulate more widely held resentments (for example, between local farmers and Dublin solicitors), sometimes setting the agenda for discussions that go on long after Tomàs has left the scene.

In a somewhat similar vein, Stephiana Pandolfo presents the case of Reda, a Moroccan psychiatric patient whose delusions are not quite delusions, since he likens them to the fictions of Cervantes, with himself in the role of Don Quixote. Framed in this way, the stories he creates become reflections on the impossibility of living in European and Arabic cultures at once. As Pandolfo says, "Reda takes it upon himself to articulate a malaise larger than his own, that of a collectivity of which he becomes an echo" (p. 337).

In other cases political violence creates its own locally inflected forms of mental illness. For example, John M. MacDougal chronicles the downfall of an outspoken and effective activist in Lombok, Indonesia, as a shifting political landscape undermined his brand of idealistic nationalism together with his access to followers. MacDougal traces his downward spiral into a bizarre paranoid delusional system, which, for all its strangeness, contained points of real insight into the current political situation. In a very different setting, Erica James Caple examines the emotional scars left by the chronic insecurity and pervasive criminal violence of Haiti in the post-Duvalier years, especially among the urban poor. To call these scars "traumatic" is to understate the case, since they are responses to lives lived in a state of unremitting fear. For victims of this condition, as Caple shows, intrusive memories cloaked in the idiom of *vodou* become part of the ongoing terror, arriving as the angry ghosts of lost loved ones whose murder has been neither avenged nor properly mourned.

A few of the ethnographies in *Postcolonial Disorders* move beyond this broad concern with the interplay of politics and pathology to investigate the elusive role of "the unspeakable" in postcolonial settings. Taking the unspeakable seriously, as the editors explain, means paying attention "to that which is *not* said overtly,... to that which appears at the margins of formal speech and everyday presentations of self,... to memories and subjugated knowledge claims that are suppressed politically but are made powerful precisely by their being left unsaid" (p. 15). Sometimes the forces suppressing the unspeakable are so powerful or pervasive that it becomes unthinkable as well—or at least inaccessible to conscious thought. When this happens, groups or even whole societies may come to be haunted by ideas, memories, images or fantasies that are at once alien and yet strangely familiar, examples of what Freud called "the uncanny." While this idea turns up repeatedly in the volume, two contributions develop it more fully.

In the first of these Begoña Aretxaga offers an original and penetrating analysis of the seeming "madness" of young Basque separatists who, in the 1990s turned their violence against local journalists, politicians and police, thereby alienating the very population they hoped to liberate. As Aretxaga shows, the reason for targetting these people was not simply their indirect association with the hated Spanish state. Rather, it originated in a deep ambivalence about the state itself as a vehicle for shared aspirations, an ambivalence rooted in a "traumatic secret"—widely sensed but seldom articulated—about the tainted origins of democracy in Spain (p. 43ff).

The uncanny past returns in another study by João Biehl of the so-called "Mucker War," waged by educated Germans in 19th-century Brazil against a minor religious sect that had grown up in their midst. The bizarre stories concocted about this innocuous group and the resulting extermination of its members make sense only when placed in the context of another obsession among the elite—their effort to refashion the colony into a model of Enlightenment rationalism. Biehl shows that the leaders of the attack used "a fantastic rationalism" to remake the Muckers into members of a dangerous primitive cult that posed a mortal threat to enlightened society (p. 297). The irony in this case is that the very Enlightenment ideals of tolerance and reason become the basis for an irrational attack on dark, uncanny doubles of those ideals, now imputed to the victims.

As these examples suggest, the essays in *Postcolonial Disorders*, like many of those in *Subjectivity,* are indeed provocative and even "unruly" in the sense that they repeatedly transgress disciplinary boundaries—even the very hazy boundaries defining medical anthropology today. Some might object that all this breadth verges on promiscuity, and that these collections would have been stronger had they been just a bit shorter and more tightly focused. This may well be true, but on balance, both these volumes offer so much in the way of compelling ethnography and imaginative analysis that being too inclusive seems a minor sin indeed.