

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Krase, J and DeSena, J. N.** 2023. *Covid-19 in Brooklyn: Everyday Life during a Pandemic*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ethnography has taken on many shades and meanings during the past decades with the introduction of auto-ethnography, urban ethnography and the recordings of everyday lives and collective actions in the public sphere. With the pandemic, anthropology and anthropologists faced a new challenge, of not being able to do fieldwork in close physical proximity to their subjects. This particular work done jointly by two qualitative sociologists living in the same urban area of a city, is addressed to some of these theoretical issues, namely what ethnography implies, what can be treated legitimately as data, how does one engage with urban ethnography, especially in a situation of crises like the pandemic and finally how one can theorise on the everyday vignettes of experiences both individual and collective. Rightly, the work sees theorising as critical insights into the power plays, the resistances and resilience of those who are marginal and disadvantaged and whose disabilities multiply in crises situations such as that of the pandemic. The key theoretical approaches focus on risk and uncertainty as well as questions of social justice. The analysis is directed towards a deep examination of how the impact of the virus was filtered through existing relations of hierarchy and inequality. Given that the virus was neutral to social conditions, how the latter intervened in the actual impact of the disease. Questions raised and answered are with respect to disproportionate impact

on already marginalised people, income and age being critical variables but which intersected with ethnicity to indicate that black and Hispanic regions were most affected in terms of numbers of dead and ill; correlating poverty and ethnicity in obvious ways. A moot methodological issue is the study of the upper class and privileged to uncover the nuances of inequality from the analysis of advantages rather than only looking at disadvantages faced by the marginal.

However, the approach from the top has not excluded the collective response of those on the margins. For example, the politics of vaccines has been highlighted with the insight that rejection of vaccines by the very populations that were most affected was because they did not trust and had historically no reason to trust those in power, indicating also that political affiliations were less important than economic marginalization in this respect. The key areas of theoretical analysis are largely auto-ethnographical drawing upon the experiences of the authors such as those related to school education, supplies and being part of community solidarity. Since I, too, had been part of the common experience of lockdown in New York, it was an eye opener for me to know that private schools allowed in person schooling even as parents and guardians (including myself) were struggling with online education of small children as public schools had closed their doors. Not only were most children in public schools not well equipped to study from home, many of them were deprived of their primary source of nutrition as school meals were no longer available. From the beginning the authors

have indicated their privileged social and economic positions, and in this sense certain dimensions of the social effects of the pandemic have not received much attention although they have been mentioned. Significant in this respect is the absence of a feminist perspective, a focus on not-so-privileged women and on domestic violence that had been termed (and the book mentions it), the ‘shadow pandemic’. The authors have drawn a parallel, between the have and have-nots and focussed on certain key areas of deprivation and community activity, like the open kitchens and generalized sharing of the public refrigerator, such as the highly decorated Hispanic refrigerator. What is missing is the daily lives and domestic lives of the under-privileged, understandably as the authors had no access to these.

There have been many papers on the pandemic, but this is one of the few comprehensive ethnographies that has encapsulated an entire urban neighbourhood and described the impact of the pandemic using such variables as the impact of urban poverty, gentrification and its impact on the marginal, the deepening of existing forms of inequality and mistrust at the time of a crises and the political economy as well as power play that became evident in a critical time. However, the most significant contribution of this volume comes at the end in the form of a series of superb visual capturing of the pandemic situation. It will be an understatement to say that these photographs speak a lot more than the text, even though it is a comprehensive written account. This volume is a valuable addition to the series floated by the publishers to document the Covid-19

experiences globally. It is also a significant methodological breakthrough that demonstrates how an ethnography can be produced at the time of crises, especially when there has been a redefining of the body and space equation contrary to primary ethnographic techniques of close physical proximity to the field. Here, situational contact has been replaced by a long-term immersive relationship afforded by continued residence in the neighbourhood pointing to alternative possibilities of doing urban research.

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**Sadana, R.** 2022. *The Moving City: Scenes from the Delhi Metro and the Social Life of Infrastructure*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

A few pages into *The Moving City*, I instantly realised how Rashmi Sadana’s book on the Delhi Metro is a perfect read for metro rides. Sadana’s encounters with the Metro itself and the vibrant publics that use these trains are written up as breezy vignettes that follow an ‘episodic narrative’ (p. 22), making it an ideal companion that punctuates one’s morning or evening commute. *The Moving City* exemplifies the creativity of ethnographic writing that can capture the effervescent experiences of commuting, as well as grapple with the sheer scale of a large urban transit network. This book is undoubtedly an ethnography of New Delhi as a city — from the congested streets of Old Delhi and stately boulevard of Lutyens Delhi, to its commercial malls and rapidly urbanising outskirts. Yet, this book imagines the city as being mobile — it is not

only people, but objects, aspirations, consumption, politics and so forth, that also flow through the Metro. ‘It is a built environment and a moving one’ (p. 3).

The introduction effectively situates the reader within the historical and geographic context of New Delhi and the wider National Capital Region (NCR) by following the development of the Delhi Metro since the 1990s. In this way, this book is ‘an examination of the points of connection between grand-scale planning and the thinking behind it, and the daily movements and activity of Metro commuters’ (p. 10). In particular, this book explores gendered dimensions of commuting, where the Metro both produces and reproduces certain forms of urban sociality, one that is both surveilled and liberatory (p. 73). This point is especially salient as questions of safety and violence deeply inflect the discourses around, and lived experiences of, women in New Delhi (these discussions were foregrounded when the New Delhi government made the metros free for women in 2019).

The rest of the book is divided into three parts — Crowded, Expanding, and Visible — which are composed of ethnographic vignettes rather than conventional chapters. As mentioned above, these vignettes include nuanced descriptions of commutes and conversations with people, as well as critical reflections on the urban form. Read in a linear manner, these three parts chronologically document the development of the Metro’s ongoing expansion, signified by the colour-coded lines (Red, Yellow, Green, Orange, Blue, Pink, Violent, Magenta, Grey). These fluid vignettes are

supported by detailed endnotes that ground them in engaging scholarly discussions — a writing convention that, upon closer thought, inventively reflects the contiguous aboveground-underground nature of the Delhi Metro.

Though these vignettes largely consist of self-contained stories, Sadana occasionally follows up with some key interlocutors and interviewees. Many of Sadana’s interlocutors are women — students, professionals, divorcees, grandmothers, patients — whose mobilities have been profoundly impacted by the Metro. In particular, the Metro’s ladies coach is ‘not merely a container for women; rather, it allows them to enact their own urban practice’ (p. 95). At the same time, several vignettes are composed of Sadana’s interviews with transport researchers and activists like Dunu Roy, Dinesh Mohan and Geetam Tiwari, who have critiqued the Metro for not being accessible and cost-effective, especially compared to the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) buses, which have a considerably higher ridership compared to the Metro (p. 67). Yet, the influence of E. Sreedharan, the former director of Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) who was also known as India’s Metro Man, deeply inflects the narratives of both riders and DMRC officials, including the insights of the former Chief Minister of Delhi, the late Sheila Dikshit.

A conceptual and methodological strength of this book is how Sadana simultaneously studies the Delhi Metro and the city’s diverse publics and mobilities, addressing how the Metro is both standalone and integrated (p. 7). This point is supported by Sadana’s descriptions of

other forms of transport, like buses, cycle rickshaws and e-rickshaws, which are vital in making the Metro accessible to commuters but are marginalised and neglected in policy and public discourse (pp. 187–88). In particular, Sadana resists the ways that popular and policy discourses see the Metro as ‘a darling of the city’ (p. 145), even as her own work is subsumed under this celebration. On the one hand, several narratives view the Metro as organic or spontaneous (p. 93), whilst still bringing order and discipline to Delhi’s unruly crowds (p. 140). On the other hand, Sadana clearly shows how the Metro was implemented in a top-down manner and produced neoliberal logics of consumption and reproduced hierarchies of class and caste (pp. 168-69).

In spite of the vibrant vignettes and sharp discussions that examine the meaning of ‘public’ in public transport (p. 165), I noticed some thematic and conceptual shortcomings in the book. For instance, the politics of public transport became salient when the Metro stopped running during the protests against India’s discriminatory citizenship laws in 2019 and the Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020-21. However, I believe that this book could have taken steps to interrogate the way that metros have become a paradigm of urban development that privileges top-down, state-implemented, public-private partnerships (i.e., transit-oriented development policies, p. 128). This new vision of Indian cities — which include megacities like Mumbai, and smaller cities like Jaipur and Agra — privilege consumption over citizenship, and aesthetics over accessibility. With that said, this book is nevertheless an expansive,

nuanced and grounded account of how the Delhi Metro is simultaneously an infrastructure and public space. Sadana’s prose and clarity of writing is enviable; it is something that many ethnographers (including this reviewer) would find inspiring. This would be an engaging read for scholars and students in urban anthropology, especially for those interested in Global South cities, infrastructures, and public transport.

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**Taylor, Mary N.** 2021. *Movement of the People: Hungarian Folk Dance, Populism, and Citizenship*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

In *Movement of the People*, Mary Taylor investigates the neo-populist movement known as the urban dance clubs (*táncház*, ‘dance-house’) in Hungary, identifying the many threads that make up this curious but not uniquely Hungarian phenomenon. The historical narrative is divided into seven chapters with notes, maps, black-and-white photographs, literature and copious notes. After the first two introductory chapters, in which she outlines the reasons how and why artistic movements, especially dance and folk music, are intertwined in making a nation, both historic and new, Taylor turns to the institutionalization of state youth culture anchored as it was to ‘socialist cultural management’ and ‘civic cultivation’ during the socialist period of the 1950s and 1960s. In Chapter 4, Taylor ably summarizes how the urban dance club emerged in Budapest and, subsequently, spread throughout the country and

eventually into the Hungarian diaspora in neighbouring Romania. In the next chapter, she interrogates the contradiction between the community-building potential of the dance clubs and the definition of community per se. By introducing the concept of 'collective memory', she sees the institutionalized dance clubs 'as a movement that is both transformative and transforming in broader processes of state formation'. The key to understanding this has to do with the Transylvanian connection: an exported village tradition of dance houses from Transylvania, Romania. By treating the dance clubs as sites of national memory, she offers an anthropological lens into the essentialist views of Hungarianness and tradition one can rarely find among nationalist-minded fans of dance clubs.

Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, in her treatment, she spends considerable time and attention to 'late socialism', a period outside her knowledge and fieldwork. Her familiarity with the dance clubs relates to the year she spent in Budapest, mostly in the nation's capital with occasional visits elsewhere throughout 2004-2005 and 2008, the time of her original Ph.D. research there. Strangely, she also felt the need to focus her energies on the inter-war period, a time when an equally large-scale artistic and folkloric theatrical movement occurred in Hungary, known as the Pearly Bouquet (and not 'Bouquet of Pearls', as she uses the phrase). Since she spends a good deal of time on inter-war nationalism, especially populism, it is regrettable that she did not rely on important references that would have saved her from repeating well-worn facts (Némedi

1985). Her treatment of the Hungarian scout movement of the same period is equally cursory, those interested in a truly detailed scholarly treatment of the inter-war youth movement will have to use the original sources (Bodnár 1989, Cornelius 1998).

The best part of Chapters 6 and 7 is when Mary Taylor treats the pioneer intellectuals and artists who created and maintained the dance house institution since the 1970s, her interviews and personal knowledge of the early years of 2000 are revealing how steadfastly they struggled against the odds. Yet, reading *Movement of the People* I constantly missed a sound critical and dialectical history throughout the book; strangely she dedicates her grand narrative to 'Bill Roseberry'; that is, William Roseberry, an anthropologist best remembered for his knowledge and historical materialist treatment of politics and Latin American peasantry. Yet she does not afford such framing to several key concepts, one of which is the internationalized and essentialized nature of Roma/Gypsy music and performance (Lemon 2000, Malvinni 2004); the new governing ideology of Viktor Orbán known as illiberalism (Pap 2018); or urban tourism with specific reference to Budapest (Hill 2017). Another startling one is youth. There is not a single discussion of this term either in its general historical or specific cultural context, areas that are important in scholarly pursuits (see, for example, Gillis 1981). Do we take this age category for granted? Are all youth the same? How was this term understood by politicians and cultural workers throughout the 1930s and, more especially, in the 1970s and 1980s when urban dance clubs flourished in



Hungary? Not all Hungarian ‘youth’ went to the dance clubs, the majority took part — and still do — in the international and mediatized pop culture industry. Apropos informants, I yearned for more contextualization of Taylor’s informants, their lives and backgrounds, for not counting the major figures and artists she cites, her interlocutors only pop up as impersonal ‘táncház-goers’.

There are many native Hungarian terms and names in *Movement of the People* but a lack of careful proofreading resulted in many misspellings. There is no such word in Hungarian as ‘narodnyizmus’ to refer to the Russian populists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the correct word is ‘narodnyikizmus’; there is no ‘turismus’ but ‘turizmus’; the name ‘Gergély’ should be spelled Gergely, other misspellings are just too numerous to mention. I also found some sources she utilized rather baffling and outdated. She cites Vitányi’s book of 1969, but there is no such to be found in her references, and we never find out what are the ‘Papers of the Katalin Landgráf collection’ mentioned in Chapter 6. For instance, she accessed the site of the European Folklore Institute ([http://www.folkline.hu/efi/index\\_e.html](http://www.folkline.hu/efi/index_e.html)) but such an address does not exist. She often writes about dance camps she ‘visited’ while conducting fieldwork, but does not detail them with first-hand ethnographic insights. In the final chapter, several of the major political developments since her fieldwork period are mentioned cursorily but lack thorough background research and up-to-date scholarly literature. Given what occurred since the early 2000s, and how state politics captured this neo-folkloric movement by making it into a

governmental nationalist program (Kürti 2019), it is mind-boggling how early fieldwork experiences relate to a period fifteen years later with no follow-up visit and considerable updating. It would have been a nice touch if the author offers explanations for the many photographs and maps included; also, too often, she cites excerpts and fragments from her interviews with no critical analyses.

All in all, this book reads like a delayed PhD dissertation. Most of the many figures of classic theorists from Walter Benjamin to Pierre Bourdieu, plenty of notes, and explanatory digressions in each chapter — obviously to please her advisors who themselves were not specialists in Hungary, that remained should have been abbreviated or simply discarded. Instead of providing novel insights into the major cultural transformations in late socialist and post-socialist East-Central Europe, not to forget their anthropological analyses (Cervinkova, et al. 2015, Giordano et al. 2014, Kürti and Skalnik 2009), these tend to distract from the book’s otherwise notable highlights. Even though I was looking forward to reading this book, I concluded that there is little novelty in it, it should, however, be useful for different people for different reasons. *Movement of the People* provides a useful introduction to neo-populism together with a nationalist artistic movement in one of the post-socialist states in Eastern Europe. Scholars will find well-known facts and a few intriguing aspects, graduate students will be glad to discover ideas they can rework or challenge, while frustrated undergraduates may drop it after they meddle through a book of over 300 pages. But those in Hungary who tirelessly

work and support this nationalized tourist and commercialized neo-populist industry will enjoy it for revealing just how grand, and resilient their invented tradition has become. The ‘táncház-goers’, both in Hungary and abroad, have a good reason to celebrate.

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**Werthmann, K.** 2023. *City Life in Africa: Anthropological Insights*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This book provides an outstanding synthesis of ethnographies of urban Africa from the 1930s through the early 2000s. It is especially strong concerning the earlier years when the very idea of urban research was innovative. By the early 2000s, when anthropology in urban Africa had become commonplace and varied, it was more difficult to synthesise the field. The book is organised around the central activities carried out by urban inhabitants: moving (primarily rural-urban migration), connecting (making ties with others), governing, working, dwelling, and wayfinding (how people find their way literally and figuratively). Each chapter is organised by main insights. In some chapters, at least one insight is explicitly linked to gender — for example, moving to the city means different things for men and women (Ch. 2) — although all chapters address gender. As each insight is supported by extensive presentation of relevant ethnographies, readers are introduced to classical and more contemporary works in African urban anthropology. The text is complemented by 29 pages of references to works from the 1930s to the present.

In addition to presenting major anthropological insights about people living in African cities, Werthmann emphasises the important role of female and African anthropologists. She notes work of early black African anthropologists, including Kofi Busia, Archie Mafeje, Maxwell Owusu, Absolom Vilakazi, and Bernard Magubane, and refers to many more recent researchers. She was particularly concerned

to highlight the pioneering role of women in the field. Researchers from the Rhodes-Livingston Institute had pursued urban themes since the late 1930s, even though they only gained renown for urban work in the 1950s. Even earlier, in 1922, Winifred Hoernlé had carried out research in an African neighbourhood in Windhoek (now Namibia). By 1926, as a lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, she trained multiple urban anthropologists of Africa, including other women. In addition to presenting their research throughout the text, Werthmann outlines the careers of several female anthropologists, including Hortense Powdermaker, Ellen Hellmann, Suzanne Bernus, and Suzanne Comhaire-Sylvain, in text boxes. Information on individual anthropologists is complemented by the intellectual lineages of some researchers, illustrating links, sometimes across different academic traditions. For example, both Elliott Skinner and Claude Meillassoux were funded by a 1960s grant to Paul Bohannan at Northwestern University.

This incredibly rich presentation of African urban anthropology is accompanied by relatively light analysis, despite the author's statement that one goal of the book is 'a critical appraisal of anthropology's contribution to understanding everyday life in urban Africa' (p. 1). Given the focus on 'knowledge created by means of anthropological fieldwork' (p. 3), it is notable that many early urban anthropologists did not do traditional fieldwork, often because they could not legally reside in areas where black Africans lived. Moreover, prominent anthropologists,

like Georges Balandier and Max Gluckman used both anthropological and sociological approaches (p. 12). Thus, it is somewhat unclear what the particular contributions of anthropology have been, especially as other social scientists (sociologists, cultural geographers, and historians) may use methods similar to those of anthropologists. It would have been nice if the author had addressed more directly the particular insights of anthropologists about urban Africa.

Like anthropologists elsewhere, researchers of urban Africa were motivated to address theoretical issues of the larger discipline and were limited in their perspectives by their own backgrounds and positionality. This was true of groundbreaking women researchers, among others. Many of them idealised rural life and had middle-class expectations about the appropriate role of wives. Nevertheless, female anthropologists wrote on many innovative topics, including women's work, marriage, family, intergenerational relations, and others (p. 174). A more extended analysis of their particular contributions would have been useful.

Many of the challenges to African urban dwellers were not unique, but were echoed in other parts of the world, especially those with colonial histories. Werthmann notes in the introduction, 'African perspectives on city life [...] (were) not fundamentally different from peoples' views on city life in other epochs and parts of the world' (p. 15). In the conclusion, she says, 'In many ethnographies of urban Africa, there was a remarkable lack of comparison with historical urbanisation in European



societies and with contemporary forms of rural–urban migration in other world regions, or with works in urban sociology’ (p. 179). This comparative framing within global urbanism is useful, but it was not always present in the intervening content chapters.

Finally, one of the main themes is the precarity of life in African cities, due to exploitative governments and shortages of resources, including infrastructure. Ethnographic examples often suggest continuity between the colonial and independence eras. It would have been useful if the text had addressed more directly the reasons for this and the paucity of post-independence improvements.

Routledge seems to have positioned this book as a textbook. Their web page says ‘This book introduces readers to the anthropology of urban life in Africa, showing what ethnography can teach us about African city dwellers’ own notions, practices, and reflections’; it offers instructors the option to procure an e-book inspection copy. The e-book platform, VitalSource Bookshelf, touts itself as ‘the world’s leading platform for distributing, accessing, consuming, and engaging with digital textbooks and course materials’. Although this book would be useful in more advanced classes, it is not an introductory textbook. It assumes a certain knowledge about anthropology and African studies; it is dense and full of information, with an emphasis on historical developments. It lacks colour photographs, so it is easy to include in an e-book.

This book is instead a great tool for more advanced researchers and specialists, for whom a specialised knowledge of

African urban development and change is essential. Even though I have worked many years in urban Africa, this book broadened my understanding and offered me new insights. These readers may find the e-platform, which does not easily yield exact page numbers for citations, somewhat unwieldy. Get a paper copy and encourage your libraries to do so.

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