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joy and international relations: a new methodology

Elina Penttinen, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, 152pp., ISBN: 978-0-4156-1632-4, £95.00 (Hbk)

Imagine for a moment that the world is not broken.
(Penttinen, 2013, p. 106)

*I do it for the joy it brings
because I am a joyful girl
because the world owes me nothing
and we owe each other the world*
(DiFranco, 1996)

This book is engaging from the outset, opening with a reflection on a found photograph that admits the reader into Elina's interior life; it is personal without being solipsistic or, worse, narcissistic. Elina's writing entreats the reader to share in her curiosity about the photograph she has encountered, and in the exploration that follows of the possibilities that are enabled when adopting joy as a new methodology for the study of international relations. The methodology proceeds from the questions: 'What if the world was not a problem to be fixed? Or, what if the world was not a hopeless place' (p. 10). The six-fold commitments (or 'criteria') of joy as a methodology are clearly outlined for the reader and comprise: first, the recognition of the world as entangled across all dimensions (mind/body, culture/nature, thought/action) rather than fragmented; second, the exploration of posthumanism and new materialism, with particular attention to 'nonhuman forms of subjectivity'; third, beginning not from an 'ontology of suffering' but an ontology of well-being; fourth, and following from the previous commitment, seeking out those examples of people doing and being well, even in unspeakably violent contexts; fifth, understanding the imbrication of the self in the research encounter and the ways in which we are 'becoming' as researchers even as we work; and, sixth and relatedly, understanding how our practices as researchers constitute our discipline(s)—which in turn, per Smith (2004), in part constitutes our world(s).

The book has two parts, in essence. There is a series of theoretical and conceptual investigations in the first three chapters, and then discrete but related illustrations of how 'heartfelt positivity' (p. 24) as a research practice might manifest in the four chapters that follow. Chapter 4 examines the narratives of police officers serving in international crisis management to find 'examples of things that are working well' (p. 60) to counter the more usual stories of abuse, exploitation and oppression that are common to the academic analysis of peacekeeping practices. In Chapter 5, Elina offers what I found to be the most challenging discussion in the book, using as the vehicle for her analysis two stories of 'healing and wholeness in the midst of extreme violence and war' (p. 62). It was challenging to me as Elina evokes so powerfully, in her select and careful citation from the sources with which she works, the paralysis of fear and desperation; to reach a space from which to empathise with the finding of wholeness in the face of such devastation is hard going indeed. Through recounting 'the extreme resilience and creativity the women of the Finnish Lotta Svärd organisation exhibited throughout the war' (p. 78), in Chapter 6 Elina demonstrates skilfully that

'generalizations of the war experience that universalize pain and suffering are no longer applicable' (p. 92). Finally, Chapter 7 expands upon the value of 'orthogonal approaches' to the study of the world, exploring both war from the perspective of a dog, through the analysis of the film *Stormheart*, and warcraft as comedy, through the analysis of a second film, *Men Who Stare At Goats*. In this way, Chapter 7 exemplifies the argument presented throughout the book, showing the benefit in addressing 'core IR concerns in an experimental and light-hearted way ... to create something new' (p. 105). Were I not so familiar with the pathologies of academic engagements with international relations, I perhaps might not have found the text so immediately accessible, though much of what is presented is relevant to other disciplines of the social world: anthropology, sociology, even political science would find Elina's arguments pertinent and meaningful.

There was, for me, a single jarring moment as I immersed myself in reading this book, a break in my own 'heartfelt positivity', and that was the depiction of the 'inherent capacity' (p. 76) humans have for self-healing. Elina connects this capacity to 'the assumption of *personal responsibility* for one's experiences of happiness and joy' (*ibid.*, my emphasis). While I can acknowledge the desire to 'challenge the idea that individual experience is defined by structures or outside circumstances' (*ibid.*) by recognising the agency that is possible to exert even in situations of violence and despair, it is important to me that personal responsibility for happiness and joy is always tempered with recognition that some persons are not able—for biochemical, neurological or situational reasons—to take such responsibility. Whenever the person/al is invoked, I am afraid of a slippage, from embodied reality to liberal ideal-type, wherein the connections, entanglement and multidimensional relationality that this book extends so carefully are immediately undone, replaced by atomistic individualised subjects 'free' to 'choose', to take 'responsibility' for their actions, in a configuration of the social from which power is evacuated.

I think, however, that my reaction to this sentence-in-passing, in an otherwise extraordinarily engaging book, is a product of my own history and struggles with happiness. Elina, I feel, would encourage honesty about this, as it is what I bring to the reading. It is Elina's honesty, her open-hearted spirit of curiosity and excitement about the world(s) that we could enact through our methods (*cf.* Aradau and Huysmans, 2014), which brings to this book the 'aliveness' (p. 42) that its author encourages us all to find as we explore our worlds and our places within them. 'Do it for the joy it brings', as Ani DiFranco (1996) suggests, but do it also because of the world it might bring into being: perhaps a better, brighter place.

references

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- DiFranco, A., 1996. Joyful girl. In *Dilate*. Buffalo: Righteous Babe Records.
- Smith, S., 2004. Singing our world into existence: international relations theory and September 11. *International Studies Quarterly*, 48(3), pp. 499–515.

Laura J. Shepherd
UNSW Sydney