

Book Review

Briggs, D. (2021) *Climate Changed: Refugee Border Stories and the Business of Misery.*

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Most academics are loathe to abandon their ergonomically designed chairs in seats of learning defined by the deathless quest for prestige. In recent years this charmless enterprise has been enhanced by monolithic regimes of surveillance, making ethnographic work increasingly rare, and with many early career academics now work as teaching drones on short-term hourly paid contracts, selective affiliation to citation clubs has largely replaced theoretical exploration, while ever decreasing periods spent on fieldwork inspires work that has little human resonance. However, Dan Briggs has been lurking in and around the field for years, somehow emerging as a skilled ethnographer with a proven ability to explore alcoves of humanity that defy the languid exclusivity of academic enterprise, displaying personal and academic commitment that stretches beyond the light touch fieldwork, concluding platitudes and unconnected theory a la mode that defines much contemporary ethnographic work.

While, as I will discuss, *Climate Changed* is a fine and innovative example of contemporary ethnography, first let me get my criticisms out of the way. The early chapters are in places little more than affirmations of the authors theoretical allegiances, and I would have much preferred for key theoretical propositions in particular to have been made as part of the narrative, rather than nailing the authors theory to the mast before the fieldwork sets sail. This is particularly relevant to the key section on neoliberalism and social harm, which would have had far more impact reinforcing Briggs conclusions. In an attempt to situate his endeavours within a political and institutional framework, the author writes of the problems of conducting research within the neo-liberal university. While Dan Briggs clearly has something to say, there is a considerable body of work already available, and I am not convinced that he has sufficiently mined the

available literature or added to the canon. Overall the methodology chapter could have been briefer, perhaps presented in an appendix and limiting itself to a bare, non-technical description of the methods used. This is a fine, mature, and innovative study, and there is certainly no need to justify its methodology in the orthodox manner of a PhD thesis.

The focus of the book is border stories and tales of life in refugee camps along with stories of travelling, hustling, working, starving and of risk and rejection, as the desperate and displaced struggle to get into Europe against a backdrop of global warming, conflict, and instability. In his approach to contemporaneous problems Briggs is something of an anomaly in academic research, for while the traditional ethnographic qualities of empathy and engagement are retained, Briggs is able to shift these qualities to focus upon the plight of individuals, tracking and tracing as they trek westwards across the globe. The resultant multi-site ethnography blows away some of the cobwebs that have gathered on a methodology that is too often entrenched in a simplistic industrial urban mindset set and played out against a backdrop of whining academic spats. For this ethnography is made up of disjointed spaces and places, clusters of interviews, observations and social media data that somehow retains the depth of classical colonial era anthropology. However, none of those pith helmeted generations of scholars were confronted with anything as profoundly overwhelming as climate change.

In *Climate Changed* Briggs seeks out the individual narratives and insights of the everyday lives, of refugees of climate change, the problems they face and how their ultimate destination in the West evades, exploits, humiliates and in many cases, ultimately kills them. Briggs moves deftly across and around both literal and metaphorical borders, as he locates a vast range of refugees, whose individual and communal traumas are conveyed to the reader, and in this readers case I was left sickened by what I read. Here I must point out that Briggs' fieldwork has more in common with that of elite investigative journalists than with academics. He chases stories across continents, creating contacts and developing relationships in a most impressive manner that are free of the ludicrous restraints currently imposed on ethnographic research by academic bureaucrats. Briggs is particularly effective in using technology to stay in contact with some of the more blighted lives, whose stories are genuinely heart-breaking. War, capitalism, crime, post-colonial attitudes and more come together in cafes and street corners, refugee camps and care centres, in the form of complex sets of problems whose mind-bending scope and scale has been long predicted, but whose consequences seldom as sensitively portrayed.

Dan Briggs has brought to the fore the essential humanity in these stories of displaced, desperate, physically and mentally damaged souls. He concludes most stylishly with a staunch refusal to indulge in simplistic gestures, neither raving at the burning skies of neoliberalism, nor reaching for the holed bucket of racist relief. The complexity and interconnectedness that pervades this book are at times daunting, as nation states, and organised crime groups combine to commit atrocities upon the most vulnerable. However, as this book explains, this vast expansive story often boils down to an understanding of the basic human desire for food, shelter, education, and rudimentary security against a backdrop of slash and burn capitalism aided and

abetted by war, and the kind of sordid nationalism that turns on the most vulnerable in times of crisis: and is there a bigger crisis than the impending end of humanity?

This is the second time that Dan Briggs has brought me close to tears with one of his books. The importance of this study is matched by its quality.

Anyway, enough of all this gloom and doom, where are you going for your holiday?