Imagining Firawa

THIS BOOK IS AN ESSAY in understanding human well-being, not as a settled state but as a field of struggle. As with goodness and reasonableness, our difficulty of achieving wellness does not diminish its hold over our imaginations, for it signifies a hope without which existence would be untenable — that life, for ourselves and those we care about, holds more in store for us than less. Though it is rare to meet people who are completely and permanently satisfied with their lot, it is rarer to meet people who expect nothing of life, abjectly accepting the status quo, never imagining that their situations could or should be socially, spiritually, or materially improved. This sense that well-being remains elusive, transitory, and unevenly distributed is felt by the rich as well as the poor, and in all societies. To explore this condition of existential dissatisfaction, I traveled to a West African country described in a recent UN report as the "least liveable" in the world.[1] In going to Sierra Leone, I wanted to see if current Western preoccupations with socioeconomic development and human rights prevent us from adequately understanding the priorities and values of ordinary Africans and whether, on balance, Sierra Leoneans have a harder time of it than Europeans and Americans in dealing with scarcity and insufficiency. African people have always faced forces from without that imperil lives and livelihoods. Though these minatory forces assume different forms at different times — slave raiding, warfare, epidemic illness, colonial domination, state interference, religious zealotry, economic exploitation, and corrupt government — they are subject to the same mix of magical and practical reactions that we in the affluent West deploy against terrorist threats, illegal immigration, market collapse, and economic recession. But well-being is always contingent on more than one's particular historical or cultural situation. It reflects a sense of discontinuity between who we are and what we might become[2] — questions of *existential well-being* and personal fate that

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/651894/9780822393696-ix.pdf by guest on 10 August 2022

Paul Gauguin depicted in his 1897 masterpiece from Punaauia (Marquesas Islands): *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*[3]

I also went back to Sierra Leone to keep a promise I had made to myself many years ago. For reasons that remain obscure to me, even now, the remote village where I did my first fieldwork in 1969–70, and where I lived with my first wife and daughter during the dry season of 1979, had become a lodestone, compelling my return. Although I had revisited Sierra Leone often over the years, I had never managed to get back to the place that had figured most imperatively in my thoughts. I would find myself remembering the laterite path that skirted the hill before Firawa, distressed grasses in the late afternoon light, stands of contorted lophira trees, the sandy shallows of the Konkoron stream, and be overwhelmed by an emotion that resembled nostalgia but which I could not exactly name.

While it is true to say that my initiation into ethnography took place in Firawa,[4] beginnings are different from origins. One can date or determine a beginning, but origins are like the succession of low hills that blur into the bluish haze of the Loma Mountains beyond Firawa. Origins are like echoes—antecedent events that continue

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/651894/9780822393696-ix.pdf by guest on 10 August 2022

to make their presence felt in the here and now, or recollections sparked by a piece of music only to fade when the music stops.[5]

Methodologically, this difference between beginning and origin resembles Gabriel Marcel's distinction between a "problem" that admits of a solution, and a "mystery" that can never be entirely solved. "A problem is something met with which bars my passage. It is before me in its entirety. A mystery, on the other hand, is something in which I find myself caught up, and whose essence is therefore not to be before me in its entirety. It is as though in this province the distinction between in me and before me loses its meaning."[6]

When Paul Ricoeur speaks of "the enigma of anteriority," this sense of something "always-already-there," he is alluding to the gap between what we can define or decide and all that foreshadows us, having the force of fact or fate, yet remaining as fugitive as memory.[7] I also like to think that the origin suggests our common humanity, whose presence is never entirely obliterated by our singular identities or the particular situations in which we find ourselves. But can we posit an original sense of well-being, grounded in our social nature, that underlies all modes of seeking or securing a good life? Just as Ricoeur claims that "the political is almost without origin" since "before Caesar there is another Caesar,"[8] I will suggest that both the problem of well-being and the question as to what makes life worthwhile are grounded in the mystery of existential discontent—the question as to why human beings, regardless of their external circumstances, are haunted by a sense of insufficiency and loss.

My approach to the study of human well-being reflects a long-held assumption that while philosophers have often asked the most searching questions regarding the human condition, ethnographic method offers one of the most edifying ways of actually exploring these questions. The radical empiricism of William James insists that "the world is a pluralism," not a unity, despite the consoling myths, cognitive maps, and interpretive models with which we camouflage the world's complexity, contradictoriness, and contingency.[9] Well-being is, therefore, one thing for the young, another for the old, and varies from place to place, person to person. Moreover, what holds true today will seldom hold true tomorrow, particularly if the day in question disappoints.

This brings me to the question of hope—that sense that one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be. For

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/651894/9780822393696-ix.pdf by guest on 10 August 2022

Gabriel Marcel, hope is the feeling that time is not closed to us,[10] a sentiment echoed by Pierre Bourdieu, for whom hope is the belief that our social investment in the world will pay off, if not immediately, then at some time in the future.[11] For Hannah Arendt, hope is synonymous with the appearance of the new which has the character of "startling unexpectedness"—something that is "inherent in all beginnings and all origins" and occurs despite "the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty."[12] This sense of promise and potential transformation that Marcel refers to as "enthusiasm for living" (*l'entrain de la vie*),[13] Bourdieu as "the forthcoming,"[14] Arendt as "natality," and Ernst Bloch as "the spirit of utopia" finds expression in millennial dreams and revolutionary ardor as much as in the banal pleasure of an excursion to somewhere new, the anticipation of a lottery draw, a sporting contest, the denouement of a mystery novel, a child's Christmas, or the impatient excitement with which one counts the days before a vacation, prepares for a new departure, or awaits the return of an absent lover or friend. Like Hannah Arendt, Ernst Bloch makes pregnancy a metaphor for this yearning for the new, this heightened anticipation of what will surprise us, take us out of ourselves, or give us a new lease on life. Yet, he argues, all such aspirations have their origin in a sense that something is missing in our lives, and that there is more to life than what exists for us in the here and now.[15] Because it is notoriously difficult to pin down exactly what it is we lack or what will complete us, our imaginations wander from one thing to another as though searching for a mislaid article. At times we imagine that the lost object was once in our possession—a loving family, an organic community, an Edenic homeland, a perfect relationship. It was there before we realized what we had; it slipped from our grasp or was stolen, leaving us to hope that it might be restored to us, as well as to dread that it is irrecoverable. At times we imagine that what we need lies ahead, promised or owed but as yet undelivered, unrevealed, or unpaid, not yet born. In this yearning for what is missing, but that we regard as rightfully ours, lies our sense of natural justice. But as Ernst Bloch observes as he discusses these questions with Theodor Adorno, our sense of what is possible is always tempered by a sense of impossibility and danger. Accordingly, hope is never the same as confidence, since one who hopes is haunted by the sense that he is hoping for the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/651894/9780822393696-ix.pdf by guest on 10 August 2022

impossible, that his hope is, deep down, a hope for life everlasting or absolute security, and that he knows, equally deep down, that he is bound to die. Because hope always arises with fear and anxiety, we tell ourselves to be careful what we wish for, since experience teaches us that the fulfillment of a dream often leads to disappointment. Hopes are dashed as often as they are realized, just as romantic love often flourishes when it is unrequited.

My fieldwork would touch on many of these issues and lead me to conclude that the anxieties of hope—in both the affluent societies of the north and the poor societies of the south—spring from the fundamentally unstable and ambiguous nature of our relationships with others and with the world.

Herein lies another assumption I make as an anthropologist—the assumption of intersubjectivity. Just as human existence is never simply an unfolding from within but rather an outcome of a situation, of a relationship with others, so human understanding is never born of contemplating the world from afar; it is an emergent and perpetually renegotiated outcome of social interaction, dialogue, and engagement. And though something of one's own experience—of hope or despair, affinity or estrangement, well-being or illness—is always one's point of departure, this experience continually undergoes a sea change in the course of one's encounters and conversations with others. Life transpires in the subjective in-between, in a space that remains indeterminate despite our attempts to fix our position within it—a borderlands, as it were, a third world.

For these reasons, intersubjectivity is not only what an ethnographer studies; it is the matrix, method, and means whereby an understanding is reached, albeit provisionally, of the other and of oneself. So it was not without significance that I learned about Ricoeur's "enigma": and Bloch's "utopian function" in the course of conversations with Harvard friends (Davíd Carrasco and Patrick Provost-Smith), and that the books themselves were conversational in form (Bloch is in conversation with his friend Theodor Adorno; Ricoeur with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay). Nor was I surprised that these conversations came to resonate with the conversations I had in Firawa—an oblique proof that the empirical and the philosophical—so often separated in the academic tradition of the West—are as necessarily and inevitably entwined as biography and history.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/651894/9780822393696-ix.pdf by guest on 10 August 2022