



Toward the Anthropology of Boredom - REDUX!

written by Allegra
November, 2013



*BOREDOM drawing [2006]
28 x 29 cm
pen on paper*


To conclude the first ever 'Allegra Virtual Retreat of Slow Food for Thought' (AVRoSFFT) we are recycling a post of which we are particularly fond: Toward the Anthropology of Boredom. Since publishing it for the first time, we have continued talking to people of this theme, and almost without failure encountered a uniform response: people burst at first into spontaneous, slightly incredulous laughter, then take a meditative pause and say "yeah, you might be onto something!" On our part we are more convinced of that than ever! Not only are we encountering alarming degrees of boredom in both academic contexts and field sites around us, but also a widespread tacit acceptance of this condition as something to be expected.

We want to challenge this and invite you to re-think this issue - and as a special bonus to wrap up this week's retreat, we are adding a bit of something new to the end, namely a postscript titled 'Boredom in Action at the UN'. ENJOY!



Toward the Anthropology of Boredom - REDUX

By [JB](#) & [MHT](#)

It is yet another day at some random conference or other, with yet another speaker being welcomed to the fore. Allured by both the captivating title of the conference, its prestigious venue and a cutting-edge, even *sexy* sounding abstract, I have prepared my spirits for a journey into the exciting, even the unknown. However, I am soon in for a rude awakening as bitter disappointment sets in along with an all too familiar conference accompaniment - boredom. 

As the presenter in the front continues her infinite cavalcade of power point slides, I struggle to keep my attention awake. Sadly, I soon realize that I am failing as I start to become overwhelmed by the collective sense of intellectual inertia overtaking the room. Soon I am persuaded that not even the presenter *herself* is paying attention to the content of her presentation - or if she was, we in the audience would never know as the monotony of her voice comes forth as utter detachment from the content of her narrative.

When the paper finally comes to a close, as if guarded against letting out the shared sigh of relief hovering in the air, everyone hurries to offer the presentation their seal of approve through weak applause. The obedient flock then follows the organizers at their invitation to share coffee and pastries next to the seminar venue, and all dive into lively discussion as if in an attempt to annul the trauma caused by the shared feeling of being held hostage by boredom.

Why is it that we seem so willing to settle with boredom at conferences both as intellectual mediocrity and as inability to engage our listeners with our presentations? Why do we continue to attend conferences if it only means novel



encounters with annoyingly familiar frustrations? Why do we ourselves (gulp!) fall guilty of being boring when *we know* that we could and SHOULD be so much more compelling?

After all, academic time at conferences is expensive, literally: people invest significant time just to be present, not to even mention the actual monetary expenses involved in travel costs. Why don't we respect all of these investments, both material and intellectual and simply - *try and do a bit better?*

This all seems incomprehensible given that, in principle at least, as academics we should be able to do pretty much *whatever we want* when presenting papers: we are able to choose our own way of organizing ourselves, and we all know that experimenting with photos, videos, even music has become not only accepted, but almost expected from us. Given further the richness that our fieldwork data accompanies us with, especially we as anthropologists really have few excuses for falling short of simply being *riveting*!

What are we really dealing with? Is it that, as people, we are just boring/easily bored, or do these sensations - which we could be persuaded to argue holding objective existence - find connections to the prevailing conditions plaguing academic scholarship?

Is it that there are a number of boxes to tick in order to belong to a research/academic community? Is it possible that we are faced with something highly relevant in regards to our collective experiences; is there something in the contemporary world that makes the experience of boredom a revealing feature of our modern lives?

This makes me think of my own research on law professionals and transnational bureaucrats and diplomats: they, too, spend a huge amount of their time attending boring events and participating in boring expert meetings. What kinds of relationships are created through boredom? What does boredom do to their



social imaginaries?

A friend of mine – with whom I studied – I met last week in London, has become a development expert working for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) at the European Commission. She explained to me how awkward it is to be a state representative when often times she feels personally closer to the NGO world. She too, complains about the lack of meaning in the everyday routine of attending one meeting after another, and the lengthy editing of policy papers and public statements. Somehow, even though our career paths are quite different, I could relate quite well with the stories of boredom she shared with me...

I recently came across *A Philosophy of Boredom*, written by Lars Svendsen. And this was not a boring read! But as much as philosophical reflection on boredom is needed in order to situate epistemologically the emergence of this modern feature of human life, anthropological insights are necessary to explore what boredom actually DO in the real life of real people, and the contexts in which it seems to serve a specific social and even political (?) function.

What do you think, dear readers: irrelevant nonsense or are we onto something here?! How do you deal with your encounters of boredom – do you try to dismiss of them or feel likewise that they hold analytical importance? Do you encounter boredom with your informants; if so, what does it tell you? Join us in discussion to figure out what the anthropology of boredom could look like & what it could offer us?!

Postscript:

BOREDOM IN ACTION AT THE UN



Mr Committee Member looks tired and frustrated. Leans on his hand, with his weight to the side, sighs audibly. Starts resting his eyes, rubs his hands on his face. Sighs again, shifts his weight to the side. It is circa 2:42 pm. Pushes his hands on his eyes, lowers his face. Yawns invisibly, raises his eyes to the sky. Yawns widely and brings his hands again to his face. Continues checking Facebook perhaps. Acts as if trying to find some outlet to boredom. Leans forward, checks microphone. Puts hands on face (perhaps he really has a headache).

Mr Committee Member is virtually sleeping now. Has placed his hand on his forearm, closed his eyes. Peaks out, closes eyes again. It is now 2:46 pm. 3 hours of work remain. On the background the talk continues. Mr Committee Member wakes up, opens eyes, leans hand on chin. Shifts weight. Sits still. Stares at the front. Scratches his head, returns hand to chin. Checks screen, scrolls mouse down, returns hand on face, reads something perhaps off screen. It is 2:48 pm.

Examines screen with finger located on his nose. Squints eyes, perhaps something on the screen caught his attention. Rolls fingers on mouse pad. UN representative next to him looks at his screen looking slightly amused. Mr Committee Member still looks at screen, scrolls fingers down. Muffles another yawn. Returns his hand on his forehead, snaps out of it by shifting weight back. Still looking at screen. Scrolling screen down. Yawns again, hides it by scratching his nose. Scrolls hands down. It is now 2: 50 pm.

On the background the litany continues via the headphones. I have no idea who is speaking or what they are saying or why. Mr Committee Member appears to have dozed off in mid action - his hand still on his mouse pad. Mr Other Committee Member next to him makes some comment or other, Mr Committee Member opens eyes looking mildly startled. The two exchange something that I cannot overhear, Mr Committee Member looks more alert. The member of the secretariat glances over at his screen again. Mr Committee Member continues surfing the web, exchanges some comment with Mr Other Committee Member in a normal voice smiling wryly; Mr Other Committee Member looks at his watch - I think



they are wondering why the meeting isn't closing already.

They exchange smiles and short comments with the member of UN secretariat next to him, all smile. Perhaps talking of why the meeting still continues. Mr Committee Member continues looking at screen, scrolling fingers down; Mr Other Committee Member is doing the same next to him. It is now 2:53 pm. Scratches eyes, puts finger on mouth, looks at screen, lowers face. Looks at Mr Other Committee Member - the two continue discussion - Mr Other Committee Member sounds like he is challenging why the meeting is still continuing. I catch their last words "absolute waste of time", uttered with added force by slight shaking of his hand.

Mr Other Committee Member is starting to look equally frustrated, twisting his fingers, glancing at his watch. And YES: it is now 2:56pm - only 4 minutes remaining before the next session continues for another 3 hours, likely AGAIN run by The Chair with no breaks. Mr Committee Member and Mr Other Committee Member are not impressed, and I don't blame them. They look at each other, roll their eyes, sink into oblivion. The session concludes and the real achievements begin, in certain ways, as people get a brief chance to socialise before bidding farewell. As the session closes, they both repeat once more: "What an absolute waste of time!"