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IMMERSIVE POLITICS AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ENCOUNTER
Anthropology and political science

Joseph MacKay and Jamie Levin

Introduction

This chapter surveys the use of anthropological findings and, especially, ethnographic methods, in political science. We show that immersive inquiry is increasingly used to study politics.[1] Indeed, the use of these methods is rapidly expanding across a wide variety of topics and geographical areas. Nonetheless, we find in this area of inquiry a central tension: On the one hand, use of immersion to study power has proven strikingly fruitful, opening a range of new avenues of inquiry for the discipline. On the other, this method, and its attendant theoretical ethos, remains somewhat marginal in a discipline widely influenced by statistical and formal or rational choice methods. We also find some practical limitations on how politics can be studied ethnographically, owing to problems of access (because political institutions may be closed to immersive study) and aggregation (because political science so often deals with large-scale phenomena). We conclude that political scientists using ethnographic methods have nonetheless tended to convert these limitations into strengths, using ethnographic methodology to open new areas for inquiry.

In reviewing research across the discipline, we emphasize our own field of International Relations (IR), and secondarily the field of comparative politics. We emphasize IR for two reasons. On the one hand, the aforementioned practical barriers to ethnographic research have been especially significant in IR. Over and above ambivalence about ethnographic methods as such, this is in part because IR's traditional objects of study—including major wars, global trade, and international institutionalization—are resistant to encapsulation in locally focused immersive research. Moreover, accessing sites of potential research on those subjects has proven especially difficult, since they tend to be closed to outsiders. In spite of these constraints, IR scholars have nonetheless managed to produce an impressive range of empirical research across a range of subject matter, including many path-breaking studies in their given areas. IR thus offers a useful subdisciplinary "site" for inquiry into the limits and potential of political ethnographic research. We additionally emphasize comparative politics simply because an exceptionally wide range of work has been done in this field, showing the potential strength of political ethnography in practice. Indeed, comparative politics represents perhaps the most frequent site of political ethnography.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we briefly survey the broad history of political science and anthropology, exploring the reasons for political science's traditional ambivalence about anthropological approaches and reviewing the current state of play. Second, we focus on a several distinct ways in which ethnographic methods have been brought to bear on the study of politics, answering distinct kinds of questions in varying ways. In so doing, we illustrate recurring problems of or limits on ethnographic research in political science, especially in IR. Finally, we suggest two adaptations of ethnographic methodology that aid in overcoming barriers to political ethnography, especially in the context of international politics.

Anthropology and political science—the state of play

The use of anthropology and ethnographic methodology in political science has an impressive but nonetheless mixed record in political science. While ethnography has proven strikingly useful for the study of politics, the widespread (and likely increasing) use of formal and statistical methods, often adapted from economics, has meant that the tools of immersion have not generally been applied at the "center" of the discipline.[2] Thus, political ethnography remains a minority pursuit though it has, in many respects, been extraordinarily productive.[3]

The approach has emerged gradually over recent decades among political scientists. Methodological handbooks aimed at qualitative, interpretive, or critically oriented scholars increasingly include chapters on ethnographic research (Cohn 2006; Gusterson 2008, pp. 57–63; Klotz & Lynch 2007). A richly detailed recent edited volume (Schatz 2009b) now provides a general point of entry. Still, these approaches have not entirely found their way into the political science mainstream. Beginning in 2000, the "Perestroika Movement" in political science called attention to the marginalization of non-statistical, interpretive, or critical methods in the discipline—dissident voices that perceived themselves as both radical and marginalized (Laitin 2003; Monroe 2005). A decade and a half later, qualitative, interpretive, or otherwise descriptively "thick" research is tolerated but remains in the minority.[4]

Conversations about ethnography in political science have often been preoccupied with scholars' theoretical purpose in deploying the method, focusing on what kinds of questions anthropological methods can answer,[5] and furthermore on what the deeper philosophical or ethical purpose of doing so should be. Thus, Schatz notes a central tension at work:

> Taken together, the two parts of the term *political ethnography* thus imply a creative tension. *Ethnography* suggests a particularizing impulse, a desire to avoid premature empirical generalization, and a preference for inductive thinking … . *Political* suggests a willingness to bracket aspects of what we see, to simplify for analytic coherence, and to seek to produce generalizations.
>
> *(Schatz 2009a, p. 306)*

Political science conversations about ethnography have often focused on this tension, often and understandably turning to theoretical and methodological advice from anthropologists. In so doing, these conversations have tended to lag behind the relevant anthropological literature, promoting ideas or practices a decade or more after they first appeared in anthropology journals.

A recent exchange of articles on these matters usefully illustrates this point. Vrasti, for example (2008, pp. 280–81), has recently argued that "a critical lag that exists between the two disciplines, a delay in cross-disciplinary reading practices. The modes of ethnographic research and writing that are presently being pursued in international studies are reminiscent of the productions cultural anthropologists started questioning during the 1980s." She notes (correctly, in

our estimation) that IR scholars continue to draw largely on Geertz (1973a) and his immediate intellectual descendants, for their ethnographic methodology, taking less note of the more critical turn in the field that followed such now-seminal works as *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus & Fischer 1986), which re-examined the power relations underlying the construction of ethnographic texts. The result, in IR, has been a field that expects the ethnographic approach to do things for which anthropologists no longer see it as entirely well suited. Vrasti (2008, p. 281) emphasizes three such (mis)uses: ethnography as data-gathering tool, as writing style, and as "theoretical sensibility." None of these reflect the critical self-examination she and her anthropological sources take to be necessary.

Vrasti's critique would appear to question the seriousness of political science's efforts at ethnography. Scholars have responded in a variety of ways. Rancatore (2010) has responded that these critiques are somewhat overdrawn, while nonetheless sympathizing with Vrasti's plea for ethnographic autocritique in IR. At least one anthropologist has weighed in on the debate (Lie 2013), emphasizing practical challenges to political ethnography. However, perhaps the most nuanced critique has come from Wedeen, who notes that "Vrasti's plea for adopting the insights of critical ethnography, and for reading anthropological theory 'post-Geertz,' oddly has her stuck in that fertile but rather dated debate of the 1980s" (Wedeen 2010, pp. 262–63). She continues:

> Instead of deriving inspiration primarily from the anthropology of the 1980s and early 1990s, we might want to chug ahead to the anthropology of the 2000s … . [M]oving on suggests discarding assertions and strategies that now seem stifling, tired, or wrong, and building creatively on what seems useful and true.
>
> *(Wedeen 2010, p. 263)*

She goes on to suggest that, "rather than romanticizing ethnography's potential contributions to political science or insisting on its particular penchant for radicalism (a position most anthropologists would disavow)," we should approach ethnographic research as an opportunity for theoretical distance provided not by the presumed objectivity of neo-positivism, but instead by theoretical distancing "made possible by an active cultivation of one's critical and innovative faculties" (Wedeen 2010, p. 264).

If this is now the "state of play" in political ethnography, the method's purpose would seem to be dual—both to broaden the scope of possible inquiry into the political by adding immersion to the disciplinary toolkit, and also to deepen researchers' self-assessment. Indeed, for Wedeen at least, the two tasks would seem to be deeply linked. On the one hand, locating oneself appropriately within the site of immersion requires self-examination. On the other, self-examination *as* a researcher requires that one engage in active empirical research. More broadly, her approach to locating ethnography in the discipline (and, we should disclose, our own view), is to advocate a middle ground or "big tent" approach, an understanding of political ethnography that makes room for both critical approaches and for explanatory ones.

In some respects, this debate reflects larger concerns about the status and purpose of ethnography in political science as such. Vrasti's appeal for a more critical international political ethnography taps into a long-standing thread in the discipline's culture. In IR especially, self-consciously critical or radical voices, including broadly historical materialist (Cox 1986), postmodern (Ashley 1986; Der Derian & Shapiro 1989), feminist (Enloe 1990; Tickner 1992; Sjoberg 2009), and postcolonial (Barkawi & Laffey 2006; Jones 2006; Geeta & Nair 2013) perspectives, have long been a vocal minority. Many proponents of ethnography in IR either fall broadly into these camps, or are in some sense fellow travelers or sympathizers with such critical projects. Such

approaches are perhaps the longest standing alternative to increasingly technical quantitative and formal approaches to studying politics. Nonetheless, many other IR-ethnographers, including many of those we review below, are located in the relatively new, but nonetheless non-critical, social constructivist camp (see for example Barnett 1997; Neumann 2012).

Another potential basis for ethnography in political science might be said to come in the form of a wide-ranging set of pleas for methodological pluralism in the field. Such approaches generally do not advocate ethnographic research as such, but do advocate heterodox approaches to conducting research. Thus, Sil and Katzenstein (2010a, 2010b) have advocated an eclectic approach to methodology, grounded in a reading of philosophical pragmatism. Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009) also emphasize pragmatism, but encourage a somewhat more unified approach. Monteiro and Ruby (2009a, 2009b) have advocated setting aside philosophical debates altogether, in the name of accepting a "prudent" plurality of approaches to research. In contrast, Jackson (2011) advocates close attention to philosophical foundations, but finds that no one set should be preferred over others—the field should instead accept multiple approaches to research design. He derives from this view a disciplined pluralism about methods. These approaches are clearly quite varied, but have in common a belief that a range of methods ought to be available to IR scholars, and indeed to political scientists writ large. Approaches that remain in the minority in the field are the likely beneficiaries—ethnography among them.[6]

More generally, many political scientists conduct research that, while not ethnographic, is nonetheless informed by a cognate focus on culture and social difference broadly conceived. For example, social constructivists in IR practice what Schatz (2009a, p. 308) has called "an ethnographic sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact."[7] While scholars of comparative politics do not have an entrenched school of constructivism as such,[8] a range of related approaches, such as "discursive institutionalism" (Schmidt 2008) offers similar insights in similar ways. We can thus locate the "ethnographic turn" in political science in a broader turn toward more socially thick research.

Varieties of political ethnography

With these foundational matters in mind, this section briefly surveys a range of approaches to the use of anthropological and ethnographic methods in the study of politics. While some instances find political scientists making use of ethnography, other contributions are influenced not by methodology so much as by theoretical or substantive empirical lessons from anthropology. We make no pretense of offering an exhaustive survey. Instead, our purpose is, first, to make clear the variety of research that has been conducted and the methods employed. Second, in so doing, we aim to highlight a few practical limits on anthropological and ethnographic methods in the study of politics.

Few if any political scientists are as broadly and deeply associated with anthropology as James C. Scott.[9] Scott's work is perhaps linked to as much to anthropological theory or styles of reasoning as to ethnographic methods. This influence includes his emphasis on local knowledge and on what might be called cultures of non-state politics. One of his major works, *Weapons of the Weak,* a study of peasant resistance against local elites, reflects extensive immersion in a Malaysian village (Scott 1985). However, his subsequent books became increasingly broad in scope and theoretical in focus, describing for example the overt and private records ("public" and "hidden transcripts") of claims elites and subalterns make against one another across a range of historical contexts (Scott 1990). His seminal *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998) describes the efforts of states to make their populations and territories "legible," rendering them easier to observe and thus manage by simplifying or eliding the detail, nuance, and complexity that

comprise localized social life in practice. The frequent failure of such efforts constitutes a limit on the normalizing, rationalizing power of modernization.[10]

The result reorients the study of power politics toward the lived and the particular, suggesting that the conventional study of politics has missed bottom-up operations of power for broadly the same reasons that states often fail to restructure and subjugate them. Scott thus exemplifies one important way in which anthropology has influenced political science. His work offers theoretical generalizations that could not readily be arrived at through the conventional methods of positive, rationalist political science. Scott remains focused on the traditional subject matter of political science—power: who has it, how it is used, and why—but brings to it an anthropological focus on locality and subaltern knowledge.

If Scott's work aims to reorient the discipline toward an anthropological way of thinking, a second approach aims to do roughly the opposite, adapting anthropological methods to answer orthodox political science questions, alongside the positivist tools already in use. The exemplary figure here is David Laitin, whose work on as civil conflict in Nigeria (Laitin 1986) and identity formation by Russian minority groups in post-Soviet states (Laitin 1998) has leveraged ethnographic data to address core political questions about the origins of violence in identity, and the formation of group identity itself.[11] Laitin identifies a tripartite typology of methods, linking formal or rational choice approaches, quantitative analysis, and narrative, with ethnographic inquiry corresponding roughly to the narrative approaches, insofar as both emphasize descriptive detail over nomothetic theory. Laitin's, ethnographic data, gathered under relatively disciplined or circumscribed conditions, provides source material for his rationalist theory building and for coding quantitative data.

Elsewhere, Kalyvas takes a similar approach, beginning with in-depth interviews he characterizes as ethnographic (Kalyvas 2006, p. 247), and then testing an elaborate rationalist explanation of the distribution of violence during civil wars using statistical methods. Similarly, Driscoll (2015) has used ethnography to provide locally specific data from the post-Soviet Central Asia for a rationalist explanation of state consolidation in the context of warlordism. These approaches all have in common a deployment or disciplining of ethnographic inquiry to answering core questions about political violence and political order, often with an eye on ethnic identity and other fundamental questions that, in many respects, exemplify the hallmark of the anthropological approach. In these studies, however, ethnography as such becomes something rather different from the freeform and immersive method applied by anthropologists, since their research design requires that it be deployed in a relatively structured way.

A third approach addresses does something quite different again. Here, political scientists proceed not by deploying ethnographic methods, but instead by drawing on substantive anthropological findings. Typical is a literature in IR that addresses war from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, Snyder (2002) draws on the anthropology of war to argue that while processes of social construction may create wide varieties in societies' propensities to engage in armed conflict, the underlying structural dynamics of international anarchy nonetheless does impose constraints on prospects for peaceful coexistence. Relatedly, Donnelly (2012, pp. 610–16) deploys anthropological lessons about social structure, particularly in the context of forager societies, to argue that hierarchy and violence are not necessary corollaries of social order, and thus need not be features of international society. Azar Gat (2006, 2009) draws on anthropology in combination with evolutionary theory, archaeology, and a broad range of other social sciences to derive a long-run view of the origins of war in human society.

These studies both offer substantive lessons and sound a cautionary note. On the one hand, these studies provide rich detail to the study of armed conflict, much of it new to political scientists. In so doing, they raise the prospect of a new basis for IR's trans-historical generalizations,

such as those of Waltz (1979), and for understanding cross-cultural variation on the causes of war and peace. However, the range of findings in itself suggests potential difficulties. Where anthropologists have tended to focus on the socially or culturally localized or specific, political scientists commonly generalize across contexts, in search of law-like regularities. Taken together, the findings of these studies appear to be at least partially inconclusive, disagreeing on their basic claims, conflicting on cross-cultural propensity to warfare.[12] This suggests constraints on the use of extant anthropological findings to draw systematic conclusions in political science. (And, given their discipline's orientation toward the local and heterogeneous, anthropologists may find this outcome entirely appropriate.)

While IR faces especially strong barriers to ethnographic research, scholars of comparative politics have clearer opportunities to conduct immersive studies. The result has been a relative proliferation of work in that subfield, including studies focusing on the political lives of citizens, their beliefs, perceptions, and understandings of the political structures in which they find themselves. Here, a few examples from the modern Middle East, prior to the Arab Spring, illustrate. Singerman (1996) assesses how Cairo's residents formulate opportunities for political participation on a communal level, in the context of an authoritarian state. In the absence of formal political participation, she finds informal networks have emerged, often originating in the family, to take their place and to provide access to essential resources. Similarly, Ismail (2006) investigates how residents of Cairo's "new quarters"—relatively recent and unregulated parts of the city—experience the authoritarian state apparatus, as it attempts to impose regularizing neoliberal norms and structures on its population. In a study of Syrian politics, Wedeen (1999) asks why the Assad regime persisted in presenting an image of an all-knowing, all-powerful autocrat, despite widespread disbelief in the Syrian population. Elsewhere, Wedeen (2009) has investigated the fragile but persistent foundations of political unity in Yemen, linking the social fabric of political life not to institutions, but instead to shared events. She notes in particular the importance of qat chews, events where qat (a leafy, mild stimulant) is consumed at length, and deliberation across a wide range of subjects takes place (Wedeen 2007).

These studies vary in their focus, but have in common investigating the interface between citizen and state, doing so in a "thick" ethnographic way. They are, in an important sense, "completely" ethnographic, mobilizing immersive methods to answer questions about identity and thickly conceived lived experience. They are properly works of political science in the sense of having politics as their subject and in being conducted by trained political scientists borrowing from anthropology, rather than relying on the conventional toolkit of the contemporary political scientist. There is, of course, nothing unique about studying political immersion in the Middle East— similar ethnographic studies of politics have been conducted in China (Fu 2009), Central Asia (Schatz 2004), Africa (Schatzberg 1988; Fujii 2011; Fujii 2014), Latin America (Arias 2006), and elsewhere. Indeed, while the above studies of the Middle East focus on relationships between citizens and authoritarian states, analogous work can and has been conducted under democratic governments (indeed, such studies presumably provide fewer barriers to research). For example, Walsh (2003) investigates popular political deliberation in middle America, by focusing on the discursive formulation of attitudes and beliefs around a single table at a single neighborhood coffee shop, in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In an important sense, Walsh's coffee shop table and Wedeen's qat chews are comparable events, sites of regular, political deliberation and debate by citizens, out of which solidary and shared understandings of political life can be formulated.

Such thoroughly ethnographic research has been at least somewhat less common in IR. As we suggest below, this has to do in no small part with the problems of access to closed institutional sites. In some instances, international political ethnographers have dealt with this

challenge by focusing on quasi–official political activity in public or quasi–public settings. Cohn's (1987) classic study of the professional culture and discourse of American defense intellectuals is a useful example.[13] Elsewhere, anthropologist Hugh Gusterson (1998) embedded himself in the professional culture of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, a nuclear weapons development site in California. Unable for security reasons to access the site directly, he instead inserted himself into the Laboratory's attendant public spaces: "I joined a softball and a basketball team at the Lab; I joined the Lab singles group (more of a Friday evening and weekend outings club than a dating arrangement); I hung around bars in town, and I sometimes went for lunch to the Lab cafeteria" (Gusterson 2008, p. 99). Such approaches make international political ethnography work by creatively making do as best the researcher can. Where institutional sites are closed, as with sites of US defense policy decision making and weapons research, socially adjacent sites may nonetheless provide access to the cultural space of they constitute.[14]

Iver Neumann has been almost alone in directly and repeatedly immersing himself in the operations of a states' foreign policy apparatus. In his book–length study of the Norwegian foreign ministry (Neumann 2012) and in a series of related articles (Neumann 2007, 2008b), Neumann develops a detailed account of the conduct of the diplomatic service at home.[15] Here, the focus is on the quotidian practices of diplomatic life. Despite this, Neumann's access is still relatively exceptional, being based on his citizenship in a relatively small, developed liberal democracy, as well as his long–standing links to the ministry in question.[16]

Thus, this brief survey suggests that, while opportunities for ethnographic research have been relatively rich and extensive among students of comparative politics, scholars of international politics have faced greater barriers to making use of ethnographic methods. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore opportunities to work around these constraints, opening new opportunities for political ethnographies of (among other areas) the international arena.

Two kinds of political ethnography

Elsewhere (MacKay & Levin 2015), we have identified two approaches for making ethnography more readily available to IR scholars. In this section, we sketch them briefly, and provide strategies for research design. The first is a historical approach to ethnography—approximating the ethnographic ethos and answering ethnographically minded questions with reference to primary source historical research. The second is multi–sited ethnography. These approaches may well be useful to other political scientists, and indeed to other social scientists as well.

These methods are well suited to addressing two of the practical barriers that confront the ethnographic study of world politics. The first, discussed in the last section, is the problem of access. Institutional environments like the bureaucracies of international organizations, or the political structures of national security establishments, are often partially or wholly closed to outsiders. The second is the problem of aggregation.[17] IR's subject matter is necessarily global or transnational in scope. Scale and an attendant imperative to generalization almost necessarily come along with it. The field's tradition of seeking law–like regularities is thus not strictly a matter of convention. The field's stated objective to understand the "causes of war and the conditions of peace" (Levy 1998) necessarily involves generalizing across cases. However, widely distributed phenomena like "interstate wars, 1815–1989" do not in any sense lend themselves to immersive investigation. There is therefore a need to distinguish between those lines of inquiry that benefit from immersion and those that do not or cannot.

Of course, these problems are not unique to international politics. As Schatz (2009a, p. 307) notes, "Conducting ethnographic immersion about matrimonial relations between spouses might be no more possible than conducting a similar study about the causes of war." Secrecy

is a recurring feature of almost all of social life; it is hardly unique to governments are their intergovernmental agents. Nor is scale insurmountable—anthropologists long ago branched out beyond traditional immersion in the archetypal remote village.[18] Our purpose below is to show how these problems can be grappled with in studying politics.

Historical ethnography

From a conventional point of view, a historical approach to ethnography may seem a contradiction in terms, eliding as it does firsthand immersion in a social milieu. However, the conceptual leap this implies is not as great as it may appear. Anthropology has a long history of involvement with history and historiographical methods. As Cohn (1980, p. 198) writes, "Both aim, whatever else they do, at explicating the meaning of actions rooted in one time and place, to persons in another."[19] As a range of anthropologists have noted in various ways, social orders necessarily emerged gradually out of distinctive and idiosyncratic historical processes. De-historicizing culture risks reifying or naturalizing it (Marcus 1986; Ohnuki-Tierney 1990; Sahlins 1993). Indeed, the subfield of ethnohistory has persisted for decades precisely of the premise that past cultures and social contexts can be reconstructed historically (Krech 1991; Harkin 2010).[20]

Historical ethnography aims to provide quasi-immersive experience of a past institutional or other social context. It necessarily proceeds from primary historical materials: texts, of one form or another. These will likely, but not at all necessarily, be archival. The approach is closely linked to two methods likely already familiar to anthropologists: discourse analysis and genealogy. Discourse analysis is relatively well established in the IR methodological toolkit (Milliken 1999; Hansen 2006; Neumann 2008a). In IR, as elsewhere, it undertakes textual interpretation focused on shared subtexts and implied disagreements across textual sources, with the aim of understanding the discursive or textual milieu in which they operate. Similarly, a historical-ethnographic approach aims to reconstruct a socially thick historical setting out of textual material. However, it does not limit its findings to the texts themselves, aiming instead taking them as documentary evidence with which to more broadly recreate the cultural settings that produced them. Alternately, genealogists in the Foucauldian tradition aim to create a "history of the present" (Foucault 1977, pp. 27, 31) that makes sense of present social conditions by documenting the idiosyncratic and happenstance events and conditions in the past that created them. Historical ethnographers may also have such processual aims, but may alternately aim to make comparisons, contrasting one past setting to another in order to better understand both, or indeed contrasting the past with the emerging, not-taken-for-granted present.[21]

An ethnographic approach to historical inquiry offers distinctive advantages and pitfalls. While archives are less likely to "push back" than are live research subjects, they can nonetheless lie, dissemble, distort, omit, and otherwise mislead the researcher, just as might a live subject (Luehrmann 2011).[22] Moreover, archives are not naturally occurring—they are generally construed *as* archives before the researcher encounters them, with attendant sorting, and selection processes (Feldmann 2011). In other words, archives have been constructed—have been given form, order, and perhaps some elements of a narrative—before the researcher arrives. Therefore, the leap from conventional to archival immersion is not as extreme as it may sound. As Geertz (1973b, p. 15) once noted, "what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to." In this sense, the ethnographer immersed in an idealized remote village is every bit as caught up in the act of interpretation as a researcher working through the dusty materials of an archive.[23] Participant observation may be preferable, simply because it is more interactive and offers more opportunity to collect immersive data, but the difference is in no way absolute.

We offer four basic prescriptions for designing historical ethnographic research. First, and most straightforwardly, the subject of immersion must be in some sense amenable to immersive research. While many historical contexts and questions addressed by political scientists may be amenable to historically approximate immersion, many will not be. Second, the historical "site" of research must be sufficiently localized to be equivalent to a site of conventional immersion or participant observation. The purpose is not merely to emulate the operation of traditional immersion, but rather to ensure the object of study has a sufficient density of social links and commonalities to permit study as a site of cultural production or activity. Third, the textual sources used should be primary and first person. Since the purpose is to interpret the interpretations of others, research should appeal first and foremost to the *in situ* writings of participants in the activity being studied. Fourth and finally, those points of view should be multiple. The purpose, after all, is not to assess individual subjectivity, but rather intersubjectivity, in the form of shared cultural space or activity. Distributing source material across multiple points of view should allow the researcher to document not the isolated individual impressions, but instead the shared interpretations of groups or communities (Pouliot 2007).[24]

Elsewhere (MacKay & Levin 2015), we have outlined a potential historical-ethnographic study of the founding of the UN institutions, accounting for the emergence of their bureaucratic cultures. This approach might be equally well used to assess major diplomatic meetings, especially where—as with the Paris peace talks (MacMillan 2001), for example—negotiations persisted long enough to acquire a kind of social order of their own. Alternately, were sources available, a study could address the bureaucratic culture of a military establishment during a major war.

Multi-sited ethnography

While multi-sited approaches will no doubt be familiar to anthropologists, they have received surprisingly little overt attention from political scientists.[25] The elision is unusual because politics—whether governance within states or interactions in the international sphere—tends to occur in more than one place. Extending political ethnography across multiple sites may thus be not just desirable, but necessary. This goes double for researchers in IR, whose objects of study are distributed transnationally or globally. Multi-sitedness offers a way to end-run the closed doors of institutions, by focusing on their far-flung publically accessible effects.

> The essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space (because they are substantially contiguous but spatially non-contiguous)… Multi-sited ethnography involves a spatially dispersed field through which the ethnographer moves—actually, via sojourns in two or more places, or conceptually, by means of juxtaposition of data.
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> *(Falzon 2009a, pp. 1–2)*

The most visible proponent of multi-sited research in anthropology has been George Marcus (1995, 2009). As he notes, "fieldwork as traditionally perceived and practiced is already itself potentially multi-sited" (Marcus 1995, p. 100), insofar as the boundaries of the traditional research site are themselves always tacitly elastic. Even a canonical immersion in a remote village must begin by demarcating the site itself, which implicitly requires that judgments be made about neighboring communities, geographical zones, and so on. Beyond the traditional village research site, much anthropology has explicitly located itself in multiple locations. Hannerz (2003, pp. 203–06), for example, embedded himself with foreign correspondents, members of a

professional community who are necessarily mobile. Garsten (1994) took a multi-sited approach to the Apple Corporation, bringing the approach to multinational corporate culture.[26] Such approaches may be especially useful for the study of world politics. Indeed, in his original statement of intent for the method, Marcus emphasized the study of transnational or globalized phenomena (Marcus 1995).

Multi-sitedness also permits, and indeed encourages, a practice somewhat unusual for ethnography: collaboration. Multiplying observers permits a greater volume of documentation, but may also lead to questions about consistency. Such concerns are perhaps best dealt with head on. Thus, one research team advocates a reflexive approach that "requires negotiation across epistemologically diverse terrains … . The methodological work of collaboration should not be hidden; the knowledge we gain depends on it" (Matsutake Worlds Research Group 2009, p. 198). Moreover, concerns about consistency are in no way limited to collaborative or multi-sited research, since two conventional ethnographies may still disagree with one another (Heider 1988). Collaboration may force disclosure and analysis of such disagreements, broadening and deepening interpretation.[27]

Since multi-sited research rather minimally revises conventional ethnographic methods, and since it is already well established, we offer only two basic guidelines for research design, above and beyond existing ethnographic best practices.[28] First, sites must be in some way linked. Marcus identifies several forms of such linkages, framed in terms of things the researcher may "follow" across multiple sites. We emphasize two as especially useful for studying politics. One may follow people: "the procedure is to follow and stay with the movements of a particular group of initial subjects" (Marcus 1995, p. 106). Alternately, one may follow objects, tracking them across multiple social settings, "tracing the circulation through different contexts of a manifestly material object of study (at least as originally conceived), such as commodities, gifts, money, works of art, and intellectual property" (Marcus 1995, pp. 106–07).[29] Second, the research sites should share some core cultural activity or production. In political contexts, this will often be a professional or institutional culture, but need not be. For example, the shared culture of a group of refugees, tracked across the multiple sites of their migration, could well be useful in the study of politics.[30]

The range of possible uses in studying politics may thus be quite wide. Elsewhere (MacKay & Levin 2015), we have suggested that one could undertake the study of food aid distribution using a multi-sited approach. In addition to the aforementioned refugee flows or global markets for manufactured goods, diplomacy or transnational activist networks might also be studied this way.

Conclusion

Our purpose here has been to survey the use of anthropological ideas and particularly ethnographic methods in political science. We have aimed to show that their place in the study of politics is partial or incomplete, in two senses. First, despite the remarkable intellectual productivity these ideas have offered, political science as a discipline has accepted these insights somewhat incompletely or conditionally. Pachirat (quoted in Wedeen 2010, p. 256) describes their place in the disciplinary toolkit as follows: "Ethnography as a method is particularly unruly, particularly undisciplined, particularly celebratory of improvisation, bricolage, and serendipity, and particularly attuned to the possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion in ways that other methods simply are not." Studies of politics that fully embrace this style are often perceived as somewhat marginal within the discipline, subject to polite acceptance, but also a certain measure of confusion. Happily, there are at least some signs this is changing. Political ethnography is no longer new, and now has an established track record to which new practitioners can refer.

Second, political ethnography's acceptance has been incomplete insofar as it is often bur-dened by constraints, and requires adaptations, or alterations to the method itself—indeed, we have advocated some such adjustment above. Pachirat (quoted in Wedeen 2010, p. 256) goes on to note that senior figures in the discipline "often revert to the language of 'disciplining' and 'harnessing' ethnography." Such work has often been extremely productive. Even where these adaptations involve narrowing or disciplining the method sufficiently to provide data for formal or statistical analysis, the resulting research has been strikingly productive, as studies by Laitin (1986, 1998), Kalyvas (2006), and Driscoll (2015) should make clear.

Our own purpose in briefly sketching methodological advice above has been pragmatic, insofar as we aim to split the difference between these two paths. On the one hand, we aim to make ethnography more practical for the study of core *political* subject matters. On the other hand, doing so has involved varying degrees of adaptation or methodological translation. Our intent has been to make political ethnography as potentially useful as possible.

Notes

1 Given the breadth of the task, we limit ourselves to political scientists, setting aside the anthropology of politics or policy as conducted by anthropologists themselves (see for example Shore et al. 2011; Shore & Wright 1997).

2 Such influences are too broad to easily survey. By way of example from IR, one might emphasize the use of bargaining models to explain the onset of inter-state war (Fearon 1995; Wagner 2000; Powell 2002). Alternately, the influence of economic globalization on peace is a key feature of democratic or liberal peace theories—accounts which are generally formalized using rational choice approaches (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 1999) and tested using advanced statistical methods (Oneal & Russett 2001; Gartzke 2007). Such studies vary widely in their claims, but are consistent in their methodological approaches. This has led to perceptions of a "methodological monoculture" in the field (Jackson 2011, p. 210; McNamara 2009).

3 Political ethnography nonetheless has deeper roots than we might expect. Aronoff (who holds PhDs in both anthropology and political science) has been conducting ethnographic research on politics for four decades (e.g., Aronoff 1974, 1993).

4 For example, a recent poll of IR scholars found that, while IR-theoretic orientations are increasingly diverse (only 16 percent of scholars now identify with the once-dominant realist school), a majority of US-based IR scholars continue to identify as neo-positivists (Maliniak et al. 2012, pp. 27, 32).

5 On what kinds of questions ethnography can answer, see Bayard de Volo and Schatz (2004), Jackson (2008), Wedeen (2010).

6 For a moderately skeptical view from the disciplinary mainstream, see Chernoff (2007).

7 Among constructivists, see especially the recent "practice turn" (Pouliot 2008; Adler & Pouliot 2011), which draws on practice theory in social theory (Schatzki et al. 2000), particularly on Bourdieu (1990).

8 Although, exceptionally see Green (2002). While such research is not strictly ethnographic, it often involves thickly described research on social and cultural practices, often drawing on extensive inter-viewing (e.g., Pouliot 2009).

9 Indeed, Scott, whose doctoral research was conducted in political science at Yale, is frequently mistaken for an anthropologist (Schuessler 2012).

10 Scott has since focused more regionally on state-nomad relations in highland Southeast Asia (Scott 2009), and offered a popularized account of his work on the power and politics of local knowledge (Scott 2012).

11 Laitin's conception of the relationship between ethnography and other political science methods seems to have gradually shifted over time. See a useful critical assessment in Hopf (2006), along with others in the same symposium.

12 This approach also suggests debts to older, more social evolutionary research in anthropology and archaeology. Similarly, see Galtung's (1986) social-structural account of the UN institutions, which he describes as anthropological.

13 Cohn's experience of immersion was perhaps especially "thick" in that she found the experience affected her own thinking. On the one hand, she found her subjects wholly unguarded in their lack of

feminist critique: "I had naively imagined myself as a feminist spy in the house of death—that I would need to sneak around and eavesdrop on what men said in unguarded moments…. Of course, I was wrong. There was no evidence that any feminist critiques had ever reached the ears, much less the minds, of these men" (Cohn 1987, p. 693). On the other hand, "I learned… that talking about nuclear weapons is fun. I am serious. The words are fun to say; they are racy, sexy, snappy…. Nearly everyone I observed clearly took pleasure in using the words" (Cohn 1987, p. 704). Only immersion could let her recognize that fun as real, while still taking feminist critique seriously.

14 An additional form of political ethnography may result from accident. The researcher, happening to be in the right place at the right time, finds him or herself immersed in an event or process worth documenting. Here we think especially of the odd—perhaps unique—case of Barnett's (1997, 2003) documentation of the UN bureaucracy during the Rwandan Genocide. On a government fellowship away from his academic post, Barnett happened to be attached to the US mission to the United Nations during the crisis, and witnessed the bureaucratic inaction that accompanied it. The resulting study offers unique insights into the operation of an international security bureaucracy at work. However, for just that reason, it offers few opportunities to develop general prescriptions for research design. (Moreover, given the unflattering light in which he portrays the UN institutions, it seems unlikely they would put him in the same place again.) It may be telling that Barnett's (1997) original article appeared in an anthropology rather than political science journal, suggesting residual ambivalence about ethnographic approaches in the latter discipline.

15 Neumann is consequently a political anthropologist in the literal sense, the study having served as dissertation for his second doctorate.

16 Another recent locus of connection between IR and ethnographic methods is a recent interest in Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT originated in science and technology studies (Latour 1987; Law 1992), as a way to study practice of laboratory science. While approaches have varied, the method of choice has generally been ethnographic immersion in laboratories and other natural sciences research sites (Latour & Woolgar 1986; Callon 1986; Mol 2002). Since its origins in the 1980s, applications of ANT have proliferated. While some accounts have been chiefly theoretical or methodological in objective (Walters 2002; Best & Walters 2013), empirical applications in IR have been widely varied, including studies of global finance (Porter 2013), airport security (Schouten 2014), international organizations (Bueger 2013), and state failure (MacKay 2006; Bueger & Bethke 2013). Such studies are not always methodologically immersive, but have in common a shared ethnographic style or ethos carried over from actor–network theory. For general methodological advice, see Law (2004).

17 Schatz refers similarly to problems of "scale and secrecy" (Schatz 2009a, p. 307).

18 Moreover, ethnography as a method is not alone in being challenged by scale. Research techniques ranging from interviewing to archival work must grapple with how what one learns can be applied across contexts. In principle, all methodological tools must grapple in some way with the task of scaling up.

19 See also Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) on history and chronology in anthropology.

20 Elsewhere, a doctoral program in "anthrohistory" has flourished for years at the University of Michigan, providing training that bridges historical and anthropological methods (Murphy et al. 2011).

21 On genealogy in IR more generally, see Vucetic (2011). Examples include Bartelson (1995) and Price (1995).

22 Political scientists are already well acquainted with actors' "incentives to misrepresent" their circumstances and intentions (Fearon 1995).

23 On archival research in practice, see Farge (2013).

24 Pouliot (2007) refers to "triangulating" social or intersubjective ideas and beliefs, thus referring to the shared ideational space of culture—that is, the subject of most ethnography. The concept has a lengthy history, dating at least to Davidson (1991). Others use the term somewhat differently to triangulate across methods to establish eclectic or pluralist findings (Denzin 1978; Jick 1979).

25 Exceptionally, see methodological advice in Cohn (2006).

26 See also two recent edited volume on this approach (Falzon 2009b; Coleman 2011). Multi-sited ethnography has not been without critics. Falcon (2009a, p. 7) summarizes such concerns: "A programme that proposes to be more routes than roots… could well end up… robbing ethnography of its central tenets." Put differently, immersion spread out risks being spread too thin, losing the very thickness that defines the method.

27 For an additional example, see Holland et al. (2007).

28 Introductions to ethnographic method include Hammerley and Atkinson (2007) and Maanen (2011).

29 Thus, objects may be straightforwardly material—such as manufactured goods moving in the globalized economy—but need not be persistently so: see, for example, Knorr Cetina and Breugger (2000, 2002b, 2002a) on global derivatives markets.

30 Gusterson's (1998) make-do study of nuclear researchers is in some basic sense multi-sited. Elsewhere, Bevir and Rhodes (2003) have taken a comparable approach to the study of the British government.

Further reading

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