

Political Ethnography

The University of Massachusetts Amherst, POLSCI 791PA
Fall 2016

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Wednesdays 16 – 18:30
Machmer E – 23 (class)
Office Hours: TBA

They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine—but trust your experience. Know whence you came.

- James Baldwin, *My Dungeon Shook*

*The difference between
poetry and rhetoric
is being ready to kill
yourself
instead of your children.*

- Audre Lorde, *Power*

-and how to tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up--rising through the skin of it--

- Ali Smith, *How to Be Both*

Description

What does it mean to study politics from below? How does immersion of the researcher in the research world contribute to the study of power? What are the promises, and perils, of social research that invites the unruly minutiae of lived experience to converse with, and contest, abstract disciplinary theories and categories? In this practice-intensive seminar, we explore ethnographic and other qualitative fieldwork methods with specific attention to their potential to subvert, generate, and extend understandings of politics and power. Readings draw on exemplary political ethnographies and narrative journalism as well as discussions of methodology and method in political science, sociology, and anthropology. Participants will have the opportunity to craft and conduct locally based ethnographic research projects related to their primary areas of interest and will be expected to make significant weekly commitments to field research. The seminar is intended as preparation for students planning to conduct independent fieldwork for their MA or PhD research, but those interested in the epistemological, political and ethical implications of studying power from below are also welcome.

Requirements

1. **Seminar Participation** (15%): Your preparation, presence, and participation are crucial. Please complete the required readings, be on time for each class, bring all relevant texts, and contribute energetically to the discussions. *We will strive to maintain a face-to-face seminar unmediated by electronic screens. As such, please do not plan to use laptops, cellphones, or other devices during class.* Unexcused absences, arriving late for seminars, or demonstrating an obvious lack of preparation for class will count heavily against you. You are responsible for all electronic communication sent from me to your <umass.edu> email address.
2. **Discussion Leading** (15%): Responsibility for seminar discussion leading will be divided between seminar participants. Responsibilities of the discussion leader(s) include briefly summarizing the key points of the readings, formulating provocative and engaging questions to encourage critical discussion, and writing a one page narrative summary of the discussion to be e-mailed to the list-serve before the start of the next class. Discussion leaders may use the political science department copier to make copies of any handouts for class.
3. **Field Assignments** (35%):
 - a) Initial project description, due September 14: A one page description of the research project, including a clear statement of the research question, an initial choice of field site(s), a description of relevant field research to be conducted, and a statement of what you expect to find. If you are uncertain about whether you will be able to gain access to the site, please include a second one page description of a backup site.
 - b) IRB proposal, due September 21: Follow the UMass Amherst process for research involving human subjects, Additional details to be discussed in class.
 - c) Fieldnotes: Submitted weekly to your fieldwork support triad, and to me on request. Fieldnotes should be typed (even if initially jotted down by hand in a field notebook during observation), and should clearly distinguish between observation, reflexivity, and interpretation and analysis (both theoretical and methodological). Your monthly submission of field notes should also include a separate section recording all incoming and outgoing correspondence with your fieldwork support triad.
 - d) Interview transcripts: In the course of your fieldwork, conduct at least one informal interview and submit hand-written jottings that were kept during the interview and an approximate transcript recreated immediately after the interview from the jottings and from memory. Conduct as well at least one formal, taped interview and submit a verbatim transcript for at least 10 minutes of interview time. Observational, interpretive/analytic, and self-reflexive fieldnotes should also be submitted with the transcripts.
 - e) Fieldwork support triad: you will join a 3-person group that will provide support, feedback, and constructive criticism for your fieldwork throughout the semester. As noted above, you will submit your weekly fieldnotes to this group, and you will be expected to offer substantive support, feedback, and constructive criticism to the other two members of your group. Portions of some class periods may be set aside for triad meetings, and you will be evaluated on the quality of your exchanges in these meetings.
4. **Final Paper** (35%): The seminar's culminating project is a 15 - 20 page double spaced paper in which you will bring both *the process* and the *preliminary results* of your fieldwork into critical discussion with the varieties of ethnographic approaches we have examined throughout the semester. The final paper should be submitted as a bound volume, which includes (as appendices) your research proposal, your IRB application and approval letter, your complete fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and a record of all exchanges with your fieldwork support triad. More details on final paper requirements will be available in a separate handout. *Please note that there will be no extensions or incompletes granted in this course.*
5. **Academic Honesty** is essential to creating and sustaining an intellectual community. Plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty in any portion of this course will result in a failing grade for the course and referral to the Dean of Students. For more information about what constitutes academic dishonesty, please see the Dean of Students' website: <http://umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/>.
6. **Barrier-Free Campus**: The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to making reasonable, effective and appropriate accommodations to meet the needs of students with disabilities and help create a barrier-free campus. If you are in need of accommodation for a documented disability, register with Disability Services to have an accommodation letter

sent to me. It is your responsibility to initiate these services and to communicate with me ahead of time to manage accommodations in a timely manner. For more information, consult the Disability Services website at <<http://www.umass.edu/disability/>>.

7. **There are no exams.**

Texts

(in order of appearance on the syllabus.)

Please hasten to obtain [buy, rent, borrow, download or otherwise appropriate], in any format, the books on this list. Note that all books are on order at Amherst Books (8 Main Street, Amherst, MA; 413.256.1547; amherstbooks.com).

Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (U Chicago, 2009)

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (U Chicago, 1995)

S  verine Autesserre, *Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention* (Cambridge U, 2014)

Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (Yale U, 2013)

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton U, 2015)

James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale U, 1985)

Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (U Chicago, 2014)

Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite* (Princeton U, 2011)

Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Duke U, 2015).

All other required readings will be sent via email as .pdf documents.

FAQ

Q1: Why so many books?

The format for this seminar is modeled on the idea that ethnography is a craft, an art, and a sensibility and that as such it is best learned by **watching** (reading) and **imitating** (doing) rather than by following a prescribed set of inflexible steps and procedures. As such, we dedicate the bulk of our seminar to reading ethnographies **in their entirety** and learning what we can from watching the masters perform their art. Just as a student of painting spends many hours at MOMA imitating the masters before developing her own artistic vision, I strongly encourage you to work backwards from the finished pieces of ethnography we will be reading and attempt to appropriate —imitatively—the kinds of questions and sensibilities you perceive in their work. This is probably as good a time as any to add that we will be thinking about ethnography in at least 3 modes throughout this course: 1) ethnography as a mode of access and interaction (also known as participant-observation fieldwork), 2) ethnography as a mode of analysis, and 3) ethnography as a finished product. The texts we will be reading, of course, represent ethnography in its third mode, but we will also push ourselves to work backwards from the finished text to explore the ethnographic sensibilities shaping the author’s approaches to the first two modes.

Q2: But the books are so long?!

Why not just read for the “bottom line argument” in each of these texts? Why must we read two, three, and even four hundred pages of “thick description?” The answer lies in the tri-modal nature of ethnography and ethnographic authority more generally. As a mode of analysis, ethnography eschews a simple “bottom line;” its goal is often to complexify rather than simplify the social world, and a key measure of its persuasiveness lies in its descriptive power, or verisimilitude (something you will be expected to develop in your own field notes). So, please read the books in their entirety, as complete texts, and suspend the rush to find a simple “bottom line.”

Schedule

Week 1: Wednesday, September 7: Ethnography and Interpretation

What is ethnography? What is its relationship to social science and the politics of knowledge production? What is the basis of ethnographic authority? What are the major fault lines that characterize ethnographic authority, both within and across disciplines, and to what extent do they reflect and/or drive deeper ontological and epistemological presuppositions?

Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”

James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Authority”

Michael Burawoy, “The Extended Case Method”

Timothy Pachirat, “Shouts and Murmurs: The Ethnographer's Potion”

Ed Schatz, “Ethnographic Immersion and the Study of Politics,” and “What Kind(s) of Ethnography does Political Science Need? In Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*.

Lisa Wedeen, “Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise,” in Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*

Frederic Charles Schaffer, “Why Do Concepts Need Elucidating?” in *Elucidating Social Science Concepts: An Interpretivist Guide*.

Additional References:

Dvora Yanow, “Thinking interpretively : philosophical presuppositions and the human sciences,” in *Interpretation and Method*.

Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, “Judging quality : evaluative criteria and epidemic communities” in *Interpretation and Method*.

Edward W. Said, “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors.”

Jan Kubik, “Ethnography of Politics: Foundations, Applications, Prospects,” in Schatz, *Political Ethnography*.

Lisa Wedeen, “Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science”

David Laitin, “The Perestroika Challenge to Social Science”

Bent Flyvbjerg, “The Power of Example,” in *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again*.

Week 2: Wednesday, September 14: Writing Ethnography: Jottings, Fieldnotes, Books + IRB Preparation

What is the relationship between ethnography and writing and how is it different/similar to the relationship between other research methods and writing? To what degree is good writing a necessary condition for good ethnography? How does the writing process move from jottings to fieldnotes to the finished ethnography? How does leaving ethnographic scaffolding in place contribute to the persuasiveness of an ethnography?

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* [entire]

Dvora Yanow, “Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography,” in Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*.

Carefully review UMass Amherst's IRB requirements.

Recommended:

Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, “Reforming Institutional Review Board Policy”

Kathy Cramer Walsh, “Methodological Appendix,” in *Talking About Politics* (Chicago, 2004)

Initial project descriptions due at start of class (see requirements section of the syllabus for details).

Week 3: Wednesday, September 21: Why Lived Experience Matters I: Peaceland

In her methodological appendix, Séverine Autesserre writes, “researchers...cannot rely solely on the most common political science methodologies like surveys, interviews, or document analyses...[but] must experience [everyday life] personally and learn them through practice...[something that] can only be achieved through participant and field observations.” Do you find Autesserre’s argument about the importance of ethnography to understanding the operation of power at an international scale persuasive? Why or why not? And, independent of your answer to the first question, are you persuaded by Autesserre’s ethnographic authority and interpretations?

Séverine Autesserre, *Peaceland*, entire.

Week 4: Wednesday, September 28: Why Lived Experience Matters II: Slaughterhouse as Civilization

Like Autesserre, Timothy Pachirat’s book also makes a case for the importance of ethnography to understanding and critiquing power. Compare the locus, object, and writing style of his project with Autesserre’s. What are the major similarities and differences? Is one book more persuasive than the other? Why? Also consider how Pachirat’s ethnography engages with sense, space, and positionality. What would a semiotics of space at your fieldsite look like? And finally, take up the question of ethnographic ethics in Pachirat’s work. What was his justification for conducting undercover research in the slaughterhouse? Are you persuaded by it?

Timothy Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*, entire.

Timothy Pachirat, “The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches from the Kill Floor” in Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*.

First set of typed fieldnotes due.

Week 5: Wednesday, October 5: A Rush of Stories: Ethnography, Scalability, and the Matsutake Mushroom

Anna Tsing argues that telling a rush of stories is a scientific method in desperate need of revival. Are you persuaded by her argument for the importance of the arts of noticing? In what ways is her ethnography similar to and different from Autesserre’s and Pachirat’s?

Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, entire

Week 6: Wednesday, October 12: Weapons of the Weak: Theorizing Ethnography or Ethnographizing Theory?

James C. Scott’s ethnography of peasant resistance is widely seen as a classic in the discipline of political science (and elsewhere). How does Scott self-consciously try to relate theory and ethnography, and what is the balance between the two in his book? Is Scott theorizing ethnography, ethnographizing theory, or is this a false distinction? Is Scott’s work best understood within an interpretivist or positivist framework? Why? How does his approach to ethnography compare to Autesserre, Pachirat, and Tsing’s?

James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, [entire]

Munck and Snyder, “Interview with James C. Scott” in *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics*.

Week 7: Wednesday, October 19: Fugitive Life, Fugitive Ethnography: A Fifty Page Methodological Note

Alice Goffman writes, “To evaluate any work of social science, it helps to learn how the researcher found out what he or she claims to know.” Evaluate this claim in light of the widespread critiques and defenses of Goffman’s research as crystallized in “The Trial of Alice Goffman.”

Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, entire

Timothy Pachirat, “Act 5: The Trial of Alice Goffman,” from *Among Wolves: A Play on Ethnography and Power in Seven Acts*, forthcoming.

Week 8: Wednesday, October 26: Studying Up: From Philadelphia to St. Paul’s

What are the power relations inherent in the selection and study of an ethnographic subject? Contrast Khan’s choice of subject with Goffman’s in light of Nader’s arguments about the relationship between ethnography its subjects.

Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*

Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist-Perspectives from Studying Up.”

Week 9: Wednesday, November 2: No class: Mandatory Attendance at Michael Burawoy's keynote lecture, at least one full panel, and at least one poster presentation at "Unbounding Ethnography" interdisciplinary UMass Graduate Student Conference on November 4 and 5.

See < <http://www.umass.edu/sociology/about/ethnoconf2016/call-papers-posters>>

Write a one-page summary of the most pressing questions you have about ethnography after attending the Ethnography Unbound conference and email it to the class by noon on Tuesday, November 8.

Week 10: Wednesday, November 9: Ethnography's Edges: Journalism, Memoir, Participant Action Research

What makes an ethnography and ethnography? Could Frank Wilderson's memoir be considered an ethnography? Does the question even matter? Why or why not? What is the relationship of writing to ethnography and of both to critiquing and challenging oppression? What is the difference between poetry and rhetoric and how do we tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it, rising through the skin of it? (see Audre Lorde and Ali Smith epigraphs to this syllabus.)

Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro*, entire.

No class November 16 (University follows Friday schedule) and November 23 (Fall Break). Use this time to intensify your fieldwork and fieldnote writing!

Week 11: Wednesday, November 30: Ethnographic Workshop I

Week 12: Wednesday, December 7: Ethnographic Workshop II

Week 13: Wednesday, December 14: no class: individual consultations with professor

*Final Papers due on Monday, December 19 at noon via hard copy and email as a single .pdf to the entire class.
No incompletes or extensions.*