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**SOLIDARITY WITH THE POWERFUL?**

**FIELDWORK AND ETHNOGRAPHY WITH ELITES**

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Abstract. Anthropologists have a long history talking about what we should do when we research less powerful or subordinate groups. We build rapport, we give them voice, we describe their world to others, we show their problems and their solutions. We have a kind of solidarity with them. But more of us are now researching groups with autonomous resources and power. I myself have been with NGO elites, planners and consultants, global anti-bribery activists and most recently, compliance professionals promoting business ethics. None of these people are ‘subaltern’. Our project is to ‘tell their story’, but their project is to make sure their story is a good one. While we do not simply want to ‘expose’ them, we want to tell the truth about how powerful groups operate. What kind of ethical obligations and methodological issues arise doing research with elites? What kind of solidarity should we have with them?

Anthropologists have a long history talking about what we should do when we research less powerful or subordinate groups. We have been socialized, or even instructed, as to the ethical obligations of researching groups who may be adversely affected by what we do. Such groups may be indifferent or even hostile to us because we are associated with outside powers. The guidelines for anthropological ethics, or for most IRBs, is that our quest for knowledge should be subordinated to the vulnerability of whom we study. We should, in short, do no harm. In fact, we should ensure that our research does some good, that we give informants some kind of voice, that we show their problems and adaptations to the outside world in an honest and dignified manner, and that we disseminate our conclusions to them. Good fieldwork, and good ethnographic text production, is supposed to involve some kind of empathy, or even solidarity, with the groups we study. This is because these groups are considered to be subaltern in some way. Our ethics are partly based on a premise that the kind of power we have as academic researchers attached to Western institutions of power and knowledge, that our kind of power is greater than the resources of our target populations. Therefore, to compensate for our power, we have to act ethically. Anthropologists accused of not acting in this way, of exploiting their tribes or neglecting their mission, have caused scandals in the discipline. In the conventional view, any quest for scientific data should yield to the needs and sensitivity of the groups we study. We ‘owe’ it to them. To use Graeber’s terminology: we have a debt.

I have said all this because I think anthropology has entered a new era, insofar as our gaze has now extended to people who are powerful, at times, even more powerful than we are. And the question I want to ask is whether this development –studying up -- changes the ethical project, and in particular the way in which we pursue our quest for knowledge. I think it does. And I think that we need to rethink the ethical balance between what we ‘owe’ to our informants, and our quest to find out what is going on. In short, I will ask, whether the imperative of solidarity also obviates or calls into question our solidarity with the powerful, with elites.

I myself come to this dilemma after various interactions with elite groups, both as researcher and as consultant. Such groups include the communist party school instructors and urban planners in socialist Romania, the democracy export consultants in the Balkans, the moral entrepreneurs and project managers within the NGO sector, the anticorruption activists and trainers working in the global ethics industry, and most recently, business ethics professionals within the corporate compliance industry. In all these cases I acted like an anthropologist, collecting first hand data, participating in their daily life, trying to figure out how they see the world. This involved the usual amount of rapport building, friendly interaction, and experiences of indifference and even hostility when they found that my presence was uncomfortable, or that my conclusions might expose or otherwise criticize their ‘mission’. I have been accused of being a spy, a provocateur, an opportunist, and the worst accusation –two weeks ago at a business ethics gathering—of being ‘subjective’. “I thought you were a real academic”, was the accusation, as the ethics consultant strolled away from me at a ‘networking’ event.

Now we have a word for these kind of people. We call them elites. Elites are people with a given amount of resources at their disposal: rhetorical, material, symbolic, social resources. Now we might say that everyone in every group has such resources, even those we might classify as socially vulnerable. But some people have resources that can compel other people to do things against their will. This is what we usually call ‘power’ (at least pre-Foucault). Elites are people who can keep you off limits with the help of laws, bodyguards and moral authority. They know what can put anthropologists in their place. Elites are people who can treat a foreign anthropologist as an equal or as a subordinate. Or as one book described them: elites are people who think they know your research project better than you do. Of course, we can find them personally attractive and we can manipulate them during fieldwork to give us data, but we know that this may ultimately be a game that we might lose. Suddenly we are not permitted to see an archive, attend a meeting, go on a field trip.

Now elites –public officials, private business people, directors of NGOs, activists, chiefs, heads of offices, policy specialists, etc. –are inherently interesting for anthropologists. They are interesting because they have agendas which can determine the agendas of others. Their agency structures the choices of others. More importantly, elites have increasingly become the focus of ethnographic inquiry. Wherever we look in anthropology, we see ethnography of elite discourse and practice: in the anthropology of development projects, in studies of urban policy, in educational and knowledge specialists, in the study of various EU bureaucracies, and embedded in so many multisited fieldwork studies where yet another type of global assemblage is directed by or includes an elite group, a specialized network or an intriguing faction.

Some elites may indeed often know our project better than we do. This may be because they know what they have to hide, and much of what they have to hide is the object of the anthropologist’s search for data. This does not mean that the anthropologist is simply out to ‘expose’ elites. ‘Exposure’ seen in contrast with our effort to ‘understand’ the subaltern. But it does mean that there will be an undercurrent of tension as the anthropologist attempts to find out how a given system works, and the elites attempt to present themselves, or their own system, in the best possible light, even as they confide in us over cocktails. This efforts may entail selective disclosure and intentional hiding of evidence, data, information, neglecting to lead us to key informants (the failed snowball)|, limiting our access to others, and even threats of legal action, retaliation against informants, or worse. As anthropologists, we have to deal with the word ‘ No’, and an imaginative, persistent researcher finds a way around these barriers. The elites are in these cases a ‘them’ which must be detoured around. The detours may be as simple as finding another sympathetic elite with whom we can build rapport or more surreptitious, in that we obtain compensatory data through a chat room or dissenting, ex-member of an organization or company.

But what about when we cannot find a simple solution? What about when we have to make some difficult choices, cut corners, possibly embellish or misrepresent ourselves by not telling the entire truth or by just letting informants purposely misunderstand us. These are ethical dilemmas because they may conflict with the traditional research ethics which is based on openness, transparency, accountability and a degree of solidarity with informants.

And it is here that I would again like to pause and ask: Is there an ethical obligation to find the truth? Is there an ethical obligation to keep going regardless of the lines we cross, the feelings we hurt, the rapport we lose?

Let me answer the question in two ways: that the ethical obligation with elites is no different from the standard set of ethics in researching any group: treat them with empathy, try to understand their world, write about them in a way that they can see themselves, reveal that their world view is a valid alternative to seeing the world in the conditions in which they live. The second way says no, that the ethical obligation of researching and disseminating data about elites entails new and different imperatives because elites have power and because the anthropological project is to reveal, to lay bare how power works. And that revealing power may conflict with the ethical imperatives of research.

I myself have more and more gravitated toward the second view. And I think that we have to consider it. This is because while revealing mechanisms of power makes anthropologists feel good, studying these mechanisms can be uncomfortable for us and for our informants.

I think this dilemma has something to do with the way anthropologists study power. I think the study of power is different, or perceived differently, than say, the study of kinship or religion or economy. It is as if the study of power has an end goal of exposing or disclosing the hidden mechanisms of power. And it is one thing to study how power works on subaltern groups, and something else to study how people exercise power on others, or within institutions. Now we might say that middle managers or local elites are both the objects of power and

the subjects, and that they therefor deserve some kind of empathy from us. But how much? And at what price?

I think that the price we pay is subordinating another mission of anthropology, which is finding out the truth. This finding the truth is, of course, a cliché. More specifically, our mission as scientists is to figure out how the world works –the social world of our tribes, groups, informants – to gather data, make interpretations and disseminate these to our own tribe –scholars—in an objective and reflective manner. C. Wright Mills, my favorite sociologist, wrote a famous book called The Sociological Imagination, in which he emphasized that the purpose of social science was to tell the truth, which he described as connecting troubles and issues, biography and history. Mills criticized the sociologists of the time for evading the truth: some hid beyond abstracted empiricism, gathering data without knowing why. Others hid behind grand theory, elevating the concept without connecting it to real people. Yet another group sold themselves out to the bureaucratic ethos, solving the problems posed by others instead of telling others what problems they should be looking at. Mills wrote his book 60 years ago, before the reflective, postmodern turn in social science. Much of his critique rings true today. One might add the critique of Russell Jacoby (The Last Intellectuals) and others who see the trend of the bureaucratization of the university, audit culture, and the rise of incomprehensible intellectuals accused of pursuing their own career agendas under the umbrella of being ‘subversive’.

All of us are familiar with these critiques. The influence of IRBs and ethical discussions in anthropology has generally led us to be more circumspect with our research object: real people in daily lives. In particular, we are supposed to reflect on the possible effects of our research activities, or whether we offend/krank/ those we study in gathering data or disseminating our results. There are career aspects to this also. If our informants reject us, our careers may suffer.

The relevance here is to the ethics of anthropological fieldwork, in which we have a special relationship with our research object (people in their daily lives), and the ethics of disseminating knowledge about how people pursue their agendas, with the risk that these people with whom you had some relationship of trust regard you as betraying that trust. ‘It is difficult’, we hear. But what is it that is so difficult: telling the truth as we see it, or risking alienating our research object. Of course this makes social science, and particularly anthropology which relies on a personal relationship with informants, vulnerable. Natural scientists do not have to worry about the ‘feelings’ of their rocks, trees, animals, chemical compounds; they have only pursue knowledge and compete with colleagues. But we have to worry, and we do.

Take a typical example which many of us are familiar, the anthropology of NGOs. Most anthropologists who do fieldwork with NGOs are sympathetic with their goals. NGOs want to do good. And NGOs have to be good at doing good, that is, they have to be professional. This means that NGOs are increasingly rewarding, encouraging and recruiting professional specialists in project management, fund raising, administration, accounting. And in many countries NGO staff see the NGO world as a channel for career advancement which they cannot achieve in the public sector or private business. This means that there are the usual career and personal conflicts, especially between the founder generation and the up and coming newly qualified staff; and competition among NGOs for funds from donors and legitimacy. Anyone doing fieldwork with NGOs, either local or international, encounters these practices. They are jockeying for power and pursuit of interests; and sometime they can be quite ruthless; at the same time we find the NGOs project sympathetic and are often on good terms with NGOs activists and staff, either as informants, or as friends and acquaintances, or we may be even be assisting them in making connections or writing proposals.

Now here is the problem: most of the research presentations that I have read or heard about NGOs tend to ignore these negative aspects. On other occasions they are mentioned only in passing, or as cocktail party anecdotes, or as dysfunctions or deviations from the norm. Only in the most critical exposures of NGOs, often from nationalist or jealous organizations, have I encountered the alternative view of NGO life as ruthless, artificial, façade, empty signifier, empty container, discursive, neoliberal, conspiratorial. These interpretations are generally dismissed as exaggerated, wrong, or partisan. Yet there is in fact plenty of data to confirm that the so-called NGO sector has evolved, or degenerated into something approaching a business or a bureaucracy, or a channel for personal mobility which may or not actually help people.

Now I don’t want to pursue this any further but only want to point out that most anthropologists seem to have a problem with telling the truth here. It is not hard to see why: partly we want to be politically correct, we may give the enemy of progressive civil society ammunition if we tell it like it really is; partly we have our own careers which may be damaged if our informants won’t talk to us anymore. The result is a kind of self-censorship, or a more pompous choice of taking sides with the good guys, who happen to be the NGOs. But these good guys have their own intrigues, agendas and power games. We understand them. But do we really highlight them in our studies? What kind of self-censorship is operating, what kind of culture are we writing.

NGOs are one kind of elite, generally modest compared to other economic and political actors. What I am worried about is that our ‘care’ about our research object and our own careers may prevent us from pursuing the truth. And that pursuit of truth is also an ethical imperative.

Jack Katz I think, the sociologist, or perhaps it was Bruce Kapferer, said once that the worst ethical failing in social science is the refusal, or failure, to confront the informants with unpleasant questions. It is not a methodological shortcoming but an ethical shortcoming, a choice.

Anthropologists spend inordinate amounts of time ‘positioning’ themselves with respect to informants or groups whom they view as powerless or vulnerable. We have also debated, and experimented, with how to depict our informants and their worlds in a sympathetic, solidarity type way, showing their agency and the conditions which impel them. But once we get past the writing culture discussion, we need to go one step further and figure out how to write Elite culture. Where is the limit between understanding them and exposing them. Why aren’t more anthropologists in conflict with their elite gourps?