**SEMINAR ON**

**Difficult Fieldwork: Negotiating the Practical, Personal and Political**

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***THE PERFECT FIELDWORK***

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Consider the following recipe for what we anthropologists might imagine to be the perfect ethnographic fieldwork experience..

1. Everyone welcomes you when you enter
2. Everyone understands exactly why you are there and are sympathetic with your project
3. Your field population, the People (Group) *A* located in Place *1*, is discrete, visible, transparent, unequivocal and available. You know exactly who to study, and they are ready, willing and able to participate. People A are discrete from Peoples B and C, and you do not need to go to Places 2, 3, or 4. You can just stay in Place 1, which led than a day’s drive to a major town.
4. Everyone tells you everything you want to know.
5. The bureaucrats are friendly and accommodating.
6. Your key informant becomes your confidante, friend, mentor and fellow researcher.
7. No one has any hidden agendas, and the open agendas of others harmonize well with your need for data
8. Your use of personal intimacy gives returns, and you become intimate, friendly, even romantically involved with informants. They give you love and security. You like hanging out with them. Experiences, and emotions are ‘intense’ and satisfying. There are no awkward moments.
9. You and your informants share the same humanistic, liberal, flexible values.
10. No insects, no internet breakdown, no extreme heat, no extreme cold, no floods, no malaria, no theft, no harassment, no surveillance, and no bureaucratic intimidation of you or your informants.
11. Everyone reads what you write and agrees completely with what you wrote about them.
12. Everyone gets tangible benefits personally from your telling their story. You have helped them. They all invite you back to continue.

You might add more to the list, but what I am describing is the perfect fieldwork…..It is perfect because it is predictable and provides us with no ontological or epistemological surprises. It is emotionally satisfying. That is, we learn new things, but these new things pose no challenge to the way we experience the world or view the world.

Now one of the reasons we are here today is because that most fieldwork is not like that. The ideology of fieldwork, however, seems to perpetuate a kind of model, or standard, that fieldwork could be like this if we only had the right technique. If we built rapport, if we treated people ‘neutrally’, if we were ‘relativistic’, if we were ‘reflexive’. And to use the insect metaphor if we had enough insect repellent and the right attitude about ‘embracing’ the heat, cold, floods, burglaries, malaria and surveillance.

Fieldwork in social science is usually understood as ‘leaving the office’, going somewhere to work in archives, do interviews, attend meetings, observe behaviour, and hang out and live among informants.

Anthropological fieldwork, understood as participant-observation in people’s everyday life is something else: it is living like they do in order to understand how they experience the world; our kind of fieldwork, ethnography, is special because of its intensity – our research instrument is ourself—and because it is a rite of passage for being professional; it is not an option. Anthropologists who have not done fieldwork are extremely rare.

Historically, most anthropologists came from developed countries and studied powerless groups in the colonial countries or marginal groups in our own, such as poorer minorities. In this way we had a kind of sympathy with or even support for our field populations, who were often subject to the power or domination of those above them, in the city, who controlled their land, market, or life chances. We could not only tell their story and give them voice, but we could help them practically, with medicine, information, opportunities, translation, texts. We could offer our networks, bureaucratic access and information skills to, say, an embassy, ministry or donor. We could help them write grants, as I did, or fix their CVs or get them or their children into university. We could tell them about culture theory, about imagined communities, about academia.

It was in a way, the least we could do for gaining access, and for being able to retain access. It was an exchange. Since social life is an exchange, why not. When I did my first fieldwork in Romania, long before 1989, people asked me to take letters out of the country, contact relatives abroad, bring them bibles, get invitations to visit Denmark, get them Swiss army knives, buy Western cigarettes, change money, get birth control pills, buy books, smuggle manuscripts, and other things, which I did. So what did I get in exchange? I got their time, time to talk to them and to gain information about how an authoritarian society works or how inheritance operates in a village. I got data. We could say that I had a kind of contract. It was not always easy, and I wasn’t always successful in getting all the data, but I tried.

I managed to get data, and I managed to help people in various circumstances. But there was also a trade off. Romania was also a socialist authoritarian state under the watchful eye of the secret police. What did this mean? It meant that my informants were watched, interrogated and at times harassed. It meant that I was watched, my letters opened, my room searched, my address book copied. Each year I returned to Romania, as things got worse, fewer people in the village would talk to me, others warned me not to contact them, returned packages, etc. It meant that I was eventually followed, and in 1987 arrested at the airport, held overnight and sent home. It meant that at the Romanian embassy in Copenhagen, I was asked to spy on Romanian exiles here, and that the Romanian attaché came to my apartment with football tickets but also made reports on me. It also meant that I spent time with fiercely conservative, anti-Communist groups in the West. I may have thought of myself as an innocent anthropologist, but to the Romanians I was some kind of spy. And to the American embassy, where the science advisor, “Mr Smith”, took me to lunch and asked about the uranium plant in the village where I was living. There was a reason why the U.S., ambassador visited me in my village.

Later on I returned to Romania to go to the party school. I got in basically because I helped some Romanian sociologists at a conference. They paid back by allowing me in. In Romania I studied party leaders, but I also collected rumours in Romania, rumours about the regime, and was eventually accused of spreading rumours. Eventually I was forbidden access, and my friends and informants harassed by the police. In retrospect I could have kept quiet about some things I did. I was on the BBC and Radio Free Europe, for example. This might have saved some people from trouble. On the other hand, most foreign researchers got in trouble, or their informants in trouble, anyway.

I had in Romania, friends, informants, suspicious people and enemies. There were rumours about me and there were people who made reports about me. The same people later on expected me to ‘understand’ the situation. No hard feelings. But yes, I did have hard feelings.

The theme today is ‘dangerous fieldwork’. Unlike other people I was never in any physical danger. We anthropologists tend to look up to those who take physical risks in fieldwork, in the jungles of New Guinea, the Amazon, or Africa, and today in the ghettos of Rio or El Salvador, among the homeless in San Francisco, or among crack dealers and gangs in New York and most recently Philadelphia (where I happen to come from). In these dangerous areas there are practices which most anthropologists would condemn or deplore (drug taking, violence, crime), but which we feel our duty to understand and explain.

Other field research I have undertaken has not been dangerous, but I would say that it has not been wholly sympathetic either. I have been with a Danish anti immigration group, attending their meetings, reading their publications and speaking to their leaders; This group was anything but multicultural, and of course, I did not share their values.

I have studied elite NGOs as consultant and donors and watched the bitter careerist and opportunist fights in the democracy export industry. I have seen money wasted and people using others to promote careers.

I have for a long time studied the anticorruption industry, trying to figure out the relation between anticorruption programs and reduction of corruption. I have hung out in their offices and have been received both positively , and negatively. I was for example, denied access to see certain documents; after some critical articles on ‘anticorruptionism’ I am not especially welcome in certain anticorruption venues. Being studied by an anthropologist who doesn’t want to fight corruption but wants to study corruption fighters, an anthropologist without donor access, well, I am not that interesting any more. So I go to their meetings anyway but as a member of transparency international, not a researcher. One could say that this is unethical, but I would say that if we are to study how the world works, and especially elite worlds, that perhaps the issue of ethics, openness, and solidary with informants breaks down. You have to make choices. I do not use an IRB form. I tell them what I am doing, try to get them into conversation, and take notes. Some of these choices might end up that your informants break ties with you.

The dilemma has been that the search for knowledge that is anthropology must be subordinated to the ethics of bothering or disturbing your informants. This ethic may work when studying powerless people, but what about studying the powerful? Is there not also an ethical obligation to search for knowledge, to ask the provocative question, to keep going even if your informants get pissed off?

I am now studying business ethics, or business ethics officers and how they are trained. I go to expensive meetings and watch people sell ethics programs to businesses, or find ways to prevent whistle-blower retaliation. It is extremely interesting watching the marketization of ethics. In this project, I have been befriended by some ethics officers, many of whom find having an anthropologist around interesting (the worst thing u can be, eventually, is interesting). But in some meetings I was accused of having a hidden agenda of being anti-business. On still other occasions I have kept my mouth shut while hearing business consultants speak nonsense about culture and social theory at various management meetings.

Finally, I have a hobby, I study hidden power, in the form of conspiracy theory, and I have a conspiracy tribe called the 911 truth movement, I monitor their websites and forums, go to their meetings, and have also written about them in the Danish media. When I show up at their meetings, they know I am the enemy. I am greeted as the local CIA agent or Mossad agent. They ask me if I have my yellow pad. They take my picture. Some of them come up and start arguing with me. Once in a while I ask a question at their meetings, where I am usually the only one who is not a convert. It is uncomfortable, and usually the only friendly dialogue I get is typical for an anthropologist: the fringe or marginal people will talk to me because they don’t know who I am or because I am the only one who will listen to them. Some of the leaders of the 911 truth movement come from my own world of academia. I have no sympathy for them, for they are masquerading conspiracy theory as science; one of them here in Denmark has even used university resources to prove that the dust in the World Trade Center ruins contained explosives. A few anthropologists are also involved in this conspiracy cult. When I have given papers on this, one anthropologist accused me of not being objective, ‘well, we know where you stand’. Another criticized me without admitting that he himself was in the truth movement. At Lund, where I said that I would throw a student out of university if I found out that they believed in this, I was accused of ‘repressing alternative views’.

Now, through this, I have come to some conclusions about this kind of fieldwork where the people I study may not want or need me; and where I may have little sympathy or urge to help or support them. Insofar as an instrument t of our fieldwork is our ‘self’, we cannot hide. Once we start studying elites, they have qualities that we don’t, and unless I want to be one, the only choice I have is to reveal their world to others –the journalist—or simply try to understand them.

We are left however with the axiom that fieldwork, ethnography is based mostly on the ethnographers fundamental research instrument, himself. SELF.

Hume and Mulcock call this dilemma where the emotional self meets the research object ‘awkwardness’….. that is, the researcher’s own personality enters into the relationship with the informant and suddenly emotions lose control –we become friends, become intimate, confide secrets, may even fall in love, or we may get into arguments, break off relations – Hume and Mulcock argue that these moments of awkwardness are scientifically productive, that they are sources of scientific insight…….we should perhaps pursue, or embrace awkwardness as an instrument of insight. I have certainly had my moments of awkwardness, and lately, I am suspicious of anthropologists who do not.

I teach this book, but I have often thought about it in those moments when you get caught up in the fieldwork –when an informant asks you how to raise their kids; when someone accuses you of being a spy; or when they tell you your project is stupid or ask you to leave a meeting; or perhaps when you fall in love, or as has happened, have sex with one of the people you study, or when you have an argument with someone over how they treat their women or their attitude toward minorities; (in fact few anthropologists go native, despite their relationship with foreign cultures and peoples). Hume and Mulcock celebrate these as moments of insight. I am not sure. They are more moments that I discover that I am, alas, a human being, and that the ethnographic ‘method’ living like the people u study in order to experience the world the way they experience it, is a combination of mystique and just living. I mean what is the anthropologist’s data consist of except statement such as ‘I saw this’, “I observed that”, ‘Someone said this’, ‘Someone did that to someone else’, “You are there because I am there”, or “I am there so you don’t have to be”…….. And these days, we might add, ‘and I, the fieldworker felt this, after I sad that’….. We call this ‘data’ and as usual is difficult to convince other disciplines that this data is more than just personal impressions. I mean, I spend 18 months in a village and get to know 10 families well; or a few years with an NGO and know how they spend their day. At best, all I can do is say that the emotional intensity of my experience (I was happy, sad, bored, scared, angry) should somehow compensate for the kind quantitative or textual data that the sociologist or political scientist might obtain. I believe it does. I believe it does because the other disciplines do not deal with the emotional intensity of social life. Studying institutions, strategies, policies, or groups, as do political scientists or sociologists, there is this something missing. That something is people’s ENGAGEMENT in social life. That is, there are some things that we do out of pure routine and other things we do because others want us to do them, or because we have an engagement with it; we get fulfilled. Normally, work is something you have to do and hobbies are things you do because you want to. In our own world, that of ‘career’, these things are supposed to be combined.

I have been watching House of Cards this week. House of Cards is about power in Washington, institutions, factions, groups, strategy, tactics. But mostly it’s about emotions: betrayal, anger, indignation, revenge, domination. It’s difficult to study this kind of stuff without being there, and feeling it, even though we know that just feeling things or being someone does not necessarily give you complete insight. You need the reflective moment. Fieldwork is the compromise between being a native and being an outsider. We live like them, but we have this secret weapon of theory.

Let’s take the opposite extreme of fieldwork. Studying beautiful, harmonious, delightful things. I once heard Kirsten Hastrup say, commenting on her fieldwork with theatre people and Shakespeare, that anthropologists also have to study the beautiful. Indeed, the beautiful, the sublime, the harmonious, could certainly be the subject of ethnographic inquiry. If we do our fieldwork right, of course, we discover that behind this façade of beauty, or aesthetic projects, or intellectual inquiry, lie conflicts, contradictions, intrigues, and tensions. Most journalism, most detective stories, and much anthropology uses energy to discover, even ‘mine’ these tensions. We do so for different reasons, all based on the idea that ‘things are not what they seem’

Let me end with a few caveats.

Anthropologists are people. We study people. We study people with our humanity, our emotions. We engage and interact. This means elements elements of insecurity, insecurity, and risk. It also means that our field sites or populations may exploit us, intimidate us, or exclude us. This is especially true for studies of non-elite populations where we may have little to offer.

Implications:

1.Prepare for the failed field study……… how many of you know people who went somewhere and it simply didn’t work out……… I know one, Bolivia. Why are there so few? Is it because we anthropologists were so well prepared, or because we made deep compromises in our scientific integrity, refusing to touch on sensitive areas after having made the investment of learning the language, travel, etc.

2. Learn to make contracts. Can we learn to specify rights and obligations with informants in a nonsentimental way. I will help u this if you give me knowledge. This sounds harsh, but we also learn that in social life, a lot of human interaction is in fact contractual.

3. Prepare for betrayal. The world is full of Frank Underwoods (House of Cards) betrayer par excellence

4. Think about what kind of people should study anthropology and do fieldwork… (Paul Radin used insurance salesmen……….)