

Manifesto for Ethnography

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This is an open manifesto welcoming readers, writers, and researchers. Do not think of this manifesto as “a law,” a set of rules to be followed, a collection of recipes to be applied, a system to be adopted. In no sense is our aim to construct a grand, systematic, waterproof, “ready-made” theory/methodology counterposed to other scholastic “ready-mades.” Instead, we hope that this manifesto will be read as enabling and “sensitizing,” theoretically and methodologically, approaches to lived culture, worldly experiences, and practical sense making. That is, we hope this manifesto is “put to work” in helping to produce a wide range of ethnographies, thereby being developed, refined, and criticized without ever being locked up as a given system of thought.

What is ethnography for us? Most important, it is a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly in its own terms the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events. As arguably the first ethnographer Herodotus (1987) said in arguably the first ethnography, *The History*, “so far it is my eyes, my judgement, and my searching that speaks these words to you” (p. 171). “This-ness” and “lived-out-ness” are essential to the ethnographic account: a unique sense of embodied existence and consciousness captured, for instance, in the last line of Gerald Manley Hopkins’s poem “As Kingfishers”: “What I do is me: for that I came.” The social body is the site of this experience engaging “a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from the act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension” (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 135).

The understanding and representation of experience are then quite central, both empirically and theoretically. As William James (1978) said, “Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over* [italics added], and making us correct our

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present formulas” (p. 106). We do not want to lose, indeed we will emphasize, the openness and richness of this category, but there are two important contexts that anchor how we see it.

First are the symbolic forms, patterns, discourses, and practices that help to form it and give it shape, so that the ethnographic enterprise is about presenting, explaining, and analyzing the culture(s) that locate(s) experience. Second, and more widely, for us the best ethnography also recognizes and records how experience is entrained in the flow of contemporary history, large and small, partly caught up in its movement, partly itself creatively helping to maintain it, enacting the uncertainty of the eddies and gathering flows dryly recorded from the outside as “structures” and “trends.” To borrow the formulation of E. P. Thompson (1978), seeing human beings as “part subjects, part objects, the voluntary agents of our involuntary determination” (p. 119). Ethnography and theory should be conjoined to produce a concrete sense of the social as internally sprung and dialectically produced.

Of course, ethnography is an established practice within a variety of disciplines with their own internal histories, most prominently in anthropology, for which it serves as distinctive method and professional rite of passage. From various quarters, a series of theoretical challenges has been mounted against what are taken as its inherently uncritical humanism and impenitent empiricism, not to mention the heated topic of ethnography’s historic tie to colonialism or to the powers of the age. Ethnographic accounts can indeed assume an active centered agency in charge of its own history making and also assume, sometimes, that the whole meaning of a phenomenon is written on its surface. To avoid these dangers, we seek and endeavor to promote not simply the idea of humanistic ethnography but of a “theoretically informed” ethnographic study.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques have challenged the self-assumption of “ethnographic authority,” pointing to a discursive naivete in ethnographic writing that is unconscious of the ways in which it “writes” (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and makes culture rather than discovering or reflecting it. We recognize that ethnographic practice and writing have to be aware of their own location and relatedness to the world, this awareness itself reflecting some of the symbolic and structural positioning of all human subjects, all human experience. Equally, though, we do not want to lose the strengths and continuities, the very biases of the ethnographic tradition, in the layered and evocative, socially and historically conditioned, presentation of located aspects of the human condition from the inside, understanding that discourses/ideologies cannot be treated as if their constructed contents can be equated with lived outcomes. Furthermore, we must use these strengths for the, perhaps now more critical than ever, contribution they can make both to the critique of overfunctionalist, overstructuralist, and overtheorized views and to the positive development of reflexive forms of social theorizing, allowing a voice to those who live their conditions of existence. To focus our appeal, we propose below a fuller sense of our approach by identifying four distinguish-

ing features that clearly characterize our project. These are also lines of connection or parameters that make for a global relevance allowing “place-bound,” necessarily always local, ethnographic writing to carry across the world.

Distinguishing Characteristics of Ethnography

The recognition of the role of theory as a precursor, medium, and outcome of ethnographic study and writing. For us, though, theory must be useful theory in relation to ethnographic evidence and the “scientific energy” derived from the effective formulation of problems, rather than theory for itself. It must be of help in understanding social phenomena in relation to ethnographic evidence. So, we are not interested in “grand theory,” “pure” scholastic reason, or “abstracted” empiricism. We seek to promote “theoretical informed-ness,” “sensitizing concepts,” “analytic points,” all means of teasing out patterns from the texture of everyday life, from “pure” descriptive ethnography. These may sometimes be gathered and mobilized for more connected theoretical contributions, but although we do, in general, see ourselves absolutely within a broad project of the reflexive understanding of contemporary society, we do so primarily from a basis within the ethnographic observation of continuity and change.

We are pluralistic and historical in our view of what may count as relevant theory, but it must have aspects of generalizability and bear on some main organizing feature, or principle of change, within contemporary society. An important feature will be to offer a platform for the continuing excavation and reassessment of the conditions of production, effects, and potential applications of the “classic” texts and authors of the ethnographic tradition. A particular focus will be on the theoretical and practical discussion of the scope of ethnographic methods to identify, record, and analyze “ordinary” human practice, its openness and unpredictability, in context, and of the potentials of the method to produce “surprise” (Willis, 1980): to produce knowledge not prefigured in, and a basis for refinement and reformulation of, starting out theoretical positions. We argue that theoretically informed ethnographic writing has a crucial role to play in reshaping “theory” and in finding accommodations between, as well as forging new lines and directions from, social theorists.

The centrality of “culture”. This is not to be narrowly understood in a textual or discursive kind of way but in the broad sense of the increasing imperative for all social groups to find and make their own roots, routes, and “lived” meanings in societies undergoing profound processes of restructuring and detraditionalization, processes that are eroding the certainties of previous transitions and inherited cultures, as well as inciting them to reestablish themselves in new forms. To put it more theoretically, the contemporary disarticulations between “social being” and “social consciousness” have raised the salience of culture as an “independent” and all pervasive category, interpenetrating, continuous with, running parallel to estab-

lished social forms. As Bohman (1991) argued, “Social phenomena are shot through with indeterminacy and open-endedness” (p. vii). A very important role of the concept of culture is its way of indicating and expressing the always existing mode of indeterminacy in human life—that it cannot be reduced to economic and social conditions. Symbolic production and meaning making can never be a mirror of their environing/encompassing conditions of existence because they work through forms of consciousness and self-understanding. Equally, though, this “autonomy” must be understood in relation to the conditions of existence within which humans act, work, and create. Cultural change cannot be entirely free floating. It cannot disconnect from its moorings, whether contemporary and social or historical as embedded experience within cultures and cultural orientations that are inherited. It is autonomous because of the unpredictability of the ways in which it consciously and unconsciously “handles,” productively and reproductively, the social, not because it abolishes the social. It is exactly the showing of relations of indeterminacy embedded within the social (socioeconomic constraints) that is the source of elegance, the “traveling quality” beyond place and time, in the best ethnography. The latter shows the autonomy of culture as an expression/form within larger processes of social production and reproduction. In this regard, we can see that the “postmodern fallacy” lies not in its recognition of diversification and individualization at the cultural level but in the cutting of the latter’s social moorings. Only because it effectively declares the end of “the social” can postmodern thinking and analysis establish culture as a “floating signifier.” When it accurately sees fundamental cultural change as sometimes blotting out the immediate landscape, it inaccurately deduces that the social has been eclipsed forever. Individualization, for instance, cannot be understood as synonymous with individualizing processes but rather as a result of social processes of differentiation and diversification producing individualized feelings and forms.

A more panoramic and extended view shows an ever-increasing importance of the cultural to the social. Consent must increasingly be secured for the exercise of power, and the whole field of culture, as the play of symbolic powers, has come to offer the most sophisticated arena for understanding how this is organized and achieved. The renewed importance of everyday cultural practices, understood from below, is picked up in different ways by virtually all of the subcategories and hyphenates of the social sciences. The economic, political, juridical, ideological, institutional “levels” have to be understood very importantly through the cultural representations and practices in and through which they appear and are justified. The “cultural economy,” commercialized production, distribution, and consumption of cultural artifacts and products, occupies an ever-growing place in contemporary capitalism. No social relation or process can be understood without the mediations of culture, part of a contradictory and profound tendency toward a practical democratization of the capacity for meaning making so that any intervention, project, or analysis has to ask, even if prescriptively, “What does this mean (as consequence and outcome too) for those affected?”

A critical focus in research and writing. This is to be understood not in a narrowly Marxist or Frankfurt School manner but in the broadest sense of recording and understanding lived social relations, in part at least, from the point of view of how they embody, mediate, and enact the operations and results of unequal power. This is to trace and to try to make explicit, in ways difficult within lived practice, the lineaments of what Dilthey called “to be aware of being a conditioned being” (as cited in Pickering, 1997, p. 172). Important, too, is the ethnographic and theoretical tracing of responses to power and of how the interests and views of the powerful are often finally secured within processes and practices that may seem to oppose dominant interests.

An interest in cultural policy and cultural politics. We must explore the role of critical ethnography in developing conscious and evocative policy forms that help to make explicit embedded logics, so that social actors become more agents of their own will but within some sociological frame, somehow understood, conditioning and setting its limits of possibility—changing the social within the social.

Central here is the question, What are the social, cultural, and economic possibilities and limits for the transformative power of agency? The loss of a knowable community (a diversified society) needs a social science striving for social relevance. Policy might be termed *procedural* policy work, that is, using theoretically informed ethnographies to expand the resources of knowledge and information that social actors use to understand their own positions and the likely consequences of particular courses of action, so absorbing concepts and theories about them in to their actual practices. Associated with this is the aim to circulate knowledge about different “forms of life” between different social settings and to seek comparatively to test the forms of possible or imagined worlds against and within the grain of actual human lives.

Theoretically Informed Methodology for Ethnography (TIME)

It is necessary to say something further about our sense of the role of theory in ethnography. We are not interested in grand theory for its own sake. Though it is important and legitimate, we do not want to provide ethnographic evidence simply to exemplify or adjudicate between opposing and preexisting theoretical views. We have a view of the relation of theory to the ethnographic study of social and cultural change, of how it brokers the relations between the other three distinguishing characteristics of our project. This is what we call TIME—a theoretically informed methodology for ethnography.¹

Pascal warned us, wrote Bourdieu (1999), against “two extremes: to exclude reason, to admit reason only” (p. 72). Most basically, we are interested in recording and presenting the “nitty-gritty” of everyday life, of how “the meat is cut close to the bone” in ordinary cultural practices, and presenting them in ways that produce maximum “illumination” for readers. If you like, we are

interested in producing “aha” effects where evocative expression through data hits the experience, body, and emotions of the reader. These are moments where new understandings and possibilities are opened up in the space between experience and discourse, at the same time deconstructing and reshaping the taken for granted in a particular response to the shape of the social order, a response that transcends dichotomies such as public/private, social/individual. Aha effects fuse old experiences with new ones, thus opening up readers’ minds toward new horizons.

However, the nitty-gritty of everyday life cannot be presented as raw, unmediated data—the empiricist fallacy, data speaking for themselves—nor can it be presented through abstract theoretical categories—the theoreticist and idealist trap, the lack of interest in empirical findings. TIME sees the best form of this relation—data/theory—in the “surprise” (Trondman, 1997; Willis, 1980) that each can bring to the other. Engagement with the “real” world can bring surprise to theoretical formulations—for instance, as Garfinkel pointed out long ago, concrete living subjects are not the “cultural dopes” of much structuralist theory—and theoretical resources can bring surprise to how empirical data are understood—bringing a class or feminist perspective to understanding the “raw” experience of unemployment for instance. TIME recognizes and promotes a dialectic of surprise. This is a two-way stretch, a continuous process of shifting back and forth, if you like, between “induction” and “deduction.” Ethnography is the sensitive register of how experience and culture indicate, as well as help to constitute, profound social and structural change, but that change and continuity in change have to be conceptualized in ways not contained in ethnographic data themselves. The trick is to bring that “registered experience” into a productive but unfussy relation to “theory,” so maximizing the illumination of wider change. TIME seeks to establish analytically productive relations between theory and data, the two most important poles or dimensions of the dialectic of surprise, so escaping the usual banishment of theory to the ghettoized “theory section” devoid of aha effects.

And on the theoretical side of TIME’s shuttle, the criterion for relevance is maximum power in relation to the data for purposes of illumination, not theoretical adequacy or sophistication for its own sake. “Analytic points” can be made without recourse to a full account of the whole intellectual history of the traditions from which theory is drawn: The necessity is for sufficient, perhaps quite brief, account of the specific theoretical work that a concept or view can bring to the subject of study, its usefulness in context. Again, Bourdieu (1999) wrote, quoting Pascal, “I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do as the artist, stand at a distance; but not too far” (p. 8). New or innovative conceptual tools can also be developed, not out of but in relation to the ethnographic evidence. All this does require some degree of attention to the integrity of the conceptual tools or views being mobilized but not respect for the traditional boundaries of subject areas or “grand traditions.”

TIME is relevant here in another nonacronym sense. Even though the final write-up need not show every stage, the dialectics of surprise need time and can unfold only over time in relation to the researcher's own experience, field and theoretical. The synchronic structuralist universe of the simultaneous relation of parts is not relevant to a process of data collection and theoretical reflection building on each other. The sequencing of work on unlike materials is specific and historically bound: It cannot come in any old order. Just as the narratives of the field unfold over time and place, so do they in relation to theoretical understanding. The "scholastic" is "free time, free from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 1). Ethnographers use that time, a long time, outside of the scholastic universe, in the field of the urgencies of the world, to try to figure out what it means to be social, in the deepest sense of that word, never wholly freed themselves.

What is generally required at the theoretical side of TIME (back to the acronym now) is the development of a theoretically informed, sensitive, and flexible vocabulary, or a practical sense of relevant theoretical sites for casting the maximum illumination, including the formulation of open and energetic questions, on to a given topic of study. In this light, it is not helpful to reference our enterprise to specific traditions of theory. Different traditions and subject areas have their own terms and metaphors for picking up what are often common concepts, but for us, it is the practical issue of what is theoretically at stake with reference to a particular phenomenon that is of interest and that must be indicated. If you like, we understand theoretical sites as working at an intermediate level, as interfaces between social theory and ethnographic data. You could say that we are indicating a "halfway house" between theory and topic, connecting up relevant theoretical insights, concepts, tools from wherever they may come but that can be taken together because all can be applied to a specific topic or theme. Several particular sites or dimensions, usually including class/race/gender, age, and nationality, too, as baseline considerations, may be relevant to a specific concrete study. Theoretical sites carve out relevant sensitizing dimensions of the social theories of our time but remain sufficiently open and plastic to be able to recognize empirical questions and to register surprise. They must be open to and allow the formulation of questions without automatically generating given answers. They must be capable of unfolding and developing themselves in dialectical relation to ethnographic data.

TIME also raises possibilities within critical studies applied to policy issues. Despite its strong institutions, the public legitimation of social science is questioned. Too much of the knowledge produced has become more or less irrelevant to the nitty-gritty of how social actors experience and attempt to penetrate and shape their conditions of existence. The social sciences and humanities have a tendency to become self-referencing discourses, with theories related only to other theories in everlasting chains of the history of ideas rather than of

the world. But TIME has the possibility of striking off these chains by bringing its dialectic of surprise into engagement with culture and civic issues. This requires a dialogue between “scientific knowledge” (knowledge produced by specialist institutions) and other kinds of knowledge, especially the practical common sense and self-reflexivity of common culture. Again, this should be seen as a two-way process. TIME must be open to be surprised not only by its empirical data in the research process but also by responses to it from different public spheres.

And within those responses too might be surprise among social agents and a reinterpretation of their own experiences in relation, for instance, to the unintended consequences of their own actions over time—the aha effect in them for them, exposing the different triggers for different kinds of social becoming. Out of the dialectic between “sensitizing concepts” and ethnographic data can come evocative and imaginative answers to questions, analytic points, and aha effects. TIME is not only a theoretical-informed methodology for research, it can also be a method and catalyst for self-reflexivity and self-examination in common culture: making positions and dispositions in social space seen/revealed in an evocative way—glimpses of freedom flashing.

TIME can be open not only to the ethnographic register of lived culture but also to its directly expressed “problems and questions,” understanding its data and theory as the practical source of symbolic meaning within everyday life, which its own illuminations can add to or be tested in—making its own contribution to the moving of the “truth question” to the public sphere. This does not mean that TIME can provide more “scientific truth” compared to other methodologies or theories or whatever. TIME has to move with all that moves it. But in doing so, it might provide a usable methodology for investigating constraints and possibilities in social reality, for exploring margins of freedom as the future as well as the past embedded in the present. The crisis of the social sciences need not be an unending crisis. It is possible to regain a critical and dialogical consciousness.

Note

1. This is not an attempt to impose a new “paradigm” but a mnemotechnic device to remind us of the theoretical embeddedness of ethnography. Nor do we imagine that every piece of work must combine all the elements discussed here. Often, the best ethnography involves a theoretical sensibility and sensitivity, not evident but just below the surface.

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