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## "You're Asking the Wrong Question:" Member-Checking during Fieldwork

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In February 2014, I'd been living in Reykjavík, Iceland for just a few weeks. I was intending to study "the Icelandic Revolution" of 2008-2009, when a new series of large, public protests changed my plans. Over the course of a few weeks and then months, I met many of my research participants at these events. One such participant was Kristján<sup>1</sup>, whom I met when he asked me why a "tourist" was interested in Icelandic protests. A few months later, in the run-up to municipal elections in May, he invited me to attend an outreach event associated with the Social Democratic Alliance (SDA), one of Iceland's four major political parties at the time. There, Kristján introduced me to another party member named Thorvaldur, and we struck up a conversation that turned into an informal interview. Not unlike Kristján, Thorvaldur expressed curiosity about why an

útlendingar (foreigner) such as myself would be interested in Iceland's local politics and asked me to explain the project. Thinking that I had successfully refined my pitch over the past few months, I explained my interest in the various ongoing sovereign debt crises in Europe and the Eurozone, which elicited the question of what the so-called "age of austerity" meant for the future of social democracy in the European Union. Then, Thorvaldur rather abruptly exclaimed that I was "asking the wrong question!" "Instead," he told me, "you should be asking whether social democracy has a future *without* the European Union" (personal communication, April 2014).

What happens when a research participant tells you that your questions are wrong and that you should be doing something else? Not only did that interaction

<sup>1</sup> All participant names have been changed.

catch me off guard in the moment, I also puzzled over it for a long time thereafter. *Was* I, in fact, asking the wrong question? And if I wasn't asking the wrong question, how could I make sense of this interaction? Should it impact my research plans, and if so, how?

The practice of member-checking might offer a solution to the situation I described. Since member-checking is often embedded in the process of research itself (Given 2008), it implies that participants' responses might not only challenge the validity of research findings, but also the questions driving the research. Accordingly, member-checking promises to help the field researcher avoid the potential pitfalls of operating in an unfamiliar context. When implemented during fieldwork, it potentially prevents the researcher from pursuing a line of inquiry that would ultimately prove invalid due to inaccurate assumptions. Moreover, at first glance, the approach seems compatible with the underlying ethos of ethnographic field research, especially in light of the participatory/collaborative turn among its practitioners (Rappaport 2008).

Despite its promise, member-checking also risks conflating the practice of taking research participants *seriously* with taking them at *face value*. Had I taken Thorvaldur's "check" at face value, I might have concluded that my project was invalid (because he said as much) and followed his directive. Instead, I took him seriously. I treated his objection as a new puzzle: what did he mean when he said my question was "wrong," and why might he have perceived it that way? The latter approach generated valuable insights that I might have otherwise missed.

In my analysis, I consider how researchers might respond to (sometimes unsolicited) "member checks" on in-progress research. The dilemma researchers confront is not *whether* to respond when your interlocutors tell you that your questions (or findings) are "wrong." Rather, researchers should consider *how* to respond to participants' objections. As a strategy for dealing with this issue, I suggest that researchers may find it generative to put objections on hold, that is, to recognize that objections are potentially valuable without necessarily following the directives that may accompany them. Rather than posing a validity problem, participants' objections can instead provoke new insights.

### **Responding to Unsolicited Member-Checks During Fieldwork**

Member-checking is not only a post-hoc procedure but also often part of the research process itself (Given

2008). It's understandably attractive to ethnographically driven researchers because it reflects ethics of inclusion, reciprocity, and egalitarianism which increasingly inform fieldwork. However, it also generates tensions that should give field researchers pause before implementing the practice wholesale. Here, I consider ethical affinities between member-checking and fieldwork, and potential obstacles to implementing it.

First, member-checking appears consistent with the participatory and collaborative turns in ethnography, which seek to democratize field research by moving beyond traditional participant observation to make it a more inclusive process (McIntyre 2007; Wimpenny 2010). Collaborative ethnography "deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially through the writing process" (Rappaport 2008, 1). Similarly, in participatory action research (PAR), the project is not driven solely or even primarily by the academic researcher, but rather by a group of participants who also have control over the final product. Both collaborative ethnography and PAR emphasize that the goals of research aren't only scholarly but also political. As Bergold and Thomas (2012) write, these approaches aim to "change social reality on the basis of insights into everyday practices that are obtained by means of participatory research" (193). Academic researchers who engage in PAR or collaborative ethnography often self-identify as activists (Rappaport 2008).

Second, by recognizing that the relationship between researcher and participant is not severed at the end of an interview and/or period of fieldwork, member-checking can infuse ethnographic relationships with reciprocity. Researchers don't just take information from their participants; they develop relationships. They increasingly maintain contact with their participants and often continue returning to the field site even after the project is complete. For example, I later gave one of my participants, Jóhann, a transcription of our interview, because he had worried that he was beginning to forget the details of the events he was describing to me. In PAR and collaborative ethnography, sustained relationships extensively inform the research design. Participants are involved in making an array of decisions, often from the outset of project planning (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Although a more limited technique, member-checking enables fieldworkers to incorporate ongoing relationships and the sharing of work-in-progress into a variety of research designs. Because member-checking

calls for sustained interaction rather than one-time data extraction, it promotes a more reciprocal relationship between the researcher and participants.

Finally, PAR and collaborative ethnography have animated a broader shift in how the people involved in the research are conceptualized in relation to it; passive “research subjects” are instead active “research participants,” who have a recognized stake in the project and who have often generously contributed their time and resources. Similarly, member-checking reconfigures the dynamics of authority in the researcher-participant relationship. It affirms the idea that researchers should take their participants seriously (Astuti 2017) because they are experts on their own lives. Accordingly, it potentially helps the researcher avoid misrepresenting their participants’ beliefs, practices, experiences, and subjectivities (Koelsch 2013). In doing so, member-checking aims to make the researcher-participant relationship more egalitarian.

Altogether, member-checking offers fieldworkers a strategy for incorporating some of the inclusive, reciprocal, and egalitarian research ethics advanced by PAR and collaborative ethnography into a wider array of project designs. It’s also more adaptable to situations where the researcher might not have the established research relationships that PAR and collaborative ethnography presume. Yet it isn’t always a straightforward way of implementing the research ethics outlined above.

For example, although member-checking aims to make research more inclusive, it’s currently conceptualized in a way that isolates the interview from, and privileges it over, other ethnographic research activities as a metric of validity. While interviews often play a central role in ethnographic research, ethnographers typically don’t rely on interviews alone. They also draw on participant observation, various textual and archival sources, and material culture. As Nicholas Rush Smith’s contribution to this symposium proposes, it isn’t possible to check back with every kind of ethnographic data in the same way. Along these lines, the practice implies a hierarchy of validating sources, including among living participants in the research.

Despite efforts to promote reciprocity, member-checking still risks treating participants as repositories of information. It may misattribute a stable, static subjectivity to participants and consequently assume a one-way relationship in which the researcher merely collects knowledge or observations from the participant. The researcher (and participant) might fail to recognize that their interaction co-constitutes knowledge (Finlay

2002). Furthermore, participants don’t answer interview questions in a vacuum. They also respond to—and within—a particular milieu that may make certain questions more or less resonant with their experience and present thinking. Context shapes the extent to which the participant engages with a question, the length and detail of their answer, and the examples they discuss. Researchers therefore cannot assume that any given participant would provide the same response to the same question at a different time. By the same token, the researcher shouldn’t assume that she is static in any of the ways just described.

Lastly, in an effort to disrupt researcher-participant hierarchies, member-checking may imply that participant statements should be taken at face value, which isn’t the same thing as taking participants seriously. If a researcher accepts a participant’s claim that her interpretation is invalid on its face, it stands to reason that she should respond by discarding it. However, such a response puts the participant in the position of adjudicating not only whether the researcher’s interpretation is “right” or “wrong,” but also (indirectly) adjudicating the other participants and sources of data that inform the researcher’s findings. In contrast, taking participants seriously involves recognizing multiple sources’ contributions (Astuti 2017). As I will show in my analysis, taking all participants equally seriously creates space for conflicts and contradictions to coexist.

As presently understood, member-checking doesn’t provide much direction about how to respond to participants who say some aspect of the *research* is wrong while the project is in progress. If implemented as a continuous process, fieldworkers need a more robust way to handle unexpected objections that emerge while in the field. While member-checking does attempt to address the “known unknowns” of field research, its strategies are narrowly geared toward validity, potentially obscuring conflicts that would otherwise generate valuable insights. For example, Tanggaard (2008) argues that participant objections should not always be perceived as obstacles or negative events. Objections during interviews can be productive in the sense that they can provoke the researcher to rethink and reformulate their questions to make them more “valid” (Tanggaard 2008).

However, while participant objections can certainly generate new insights into the project itself, it is less clear that the value of engaging with them lies in achieving greater validity. Instead, the researcher may want to identify patterns of objection to expose conflicts that would otherwise remain overlooked. As Hammersley

and Atkinson (2007) note, “ethnographic research cannot be programmed...its practice is replete with the unexpected” (21). Fieldworkers expect their researchers experiences to destabilize some of their “prior knowledge,” which may require revising the project’s basic questions (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Yet Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, 21) advise against adjusting to unexpected events in the field “by taking the line of least resistance.” Rather, they explain, “there is an important sense in which all research is a practical activity requiring the exercise of judgment in context; it is not a matter of following methodological rules, nor can all the problems be anticipated, or for that matter resolved” (21).

How, then, should the researcher respond when a participant says the project question is wrong and/or directs the researcher to do something else? Should the researcher assume that her project is invalid? If the researcher receives contradictory responses, should she put more stock in some interlocutors than others? When and how should she decide? The answers to these questions can have profound consequences for the direction of an entire project. Moreover, they are resistant to anticipatory responses on the part of the researcher; not every contingency can be planned for.

The idea of exercising judgement in context offers a strategy for implementing some principles of member-checking as part of the research process. It involves recognizing the constraints that the researcher faces while in the field. Part of that may mean that the researcher recognizes that she isn’t able to interpret or act upon a participant’s objection without more information. However, this doesn’t necessarily contraindicate the underlying ethic of member-checking. Rather than treating a participant’s objection as a directive, the researcher can instead meaningfully respond by putting the objection on hold until she has sufficient context to make sense of it. In the remaining sections, I further consider the promises and pitfalls of member-checking by discussing how I responded to Thorvaldur’s objection to my question, and the one he proposed instead.

### **Responding to Participant Objections and Directives**

In this section, I examine my initial response to Thorvaldur’s (2014) claim that I was “asking the wrong question,” his directive of what he apparently saw as the right question and offer practical strategies for handling this kind of situation as it unfolds. In short, I unintentionally let his unsolicited “check” on my

question bother me throughout the subsequent year of my fieldwork. I didn’t understand why he thought my question was wrong. Moreover, what he considered “right” question flew in the face of what I thought I knew about the financial crisis in Europe. However, I went into the field open to the possibility that my prior knowledge wouldn’t hold up. On the one hand, I might have dismissed Thorvaldur’s remark. After all, it was unsolicited, and the interaction was relatively brief. On the other hand, who was I to maintain that my question was valid when an interlocutor said it wasn’t?

All along, I worried that my inability to make sense of it meant that I was missing something big. I didn’t explicitly adapt my project questions to his intervention, but if it kept nagging at me, shouldn’t I have been more inclusive of his feedback? Eventually, I concluded that Thorvaldur’s objection and directive were neither obstacles nor distractions, but rather a productive encounter that highlighted an important conflict. His objection elicited doubt not because of who he was or the nature of the interaction, but because I was unable to resolve it for quite some time. I couldn’t make sense of it without more context than I had in that moment. Nevertheless, I also would have lost out on some insights had I ignored or downplayed it.

I have since reframed the nagging doubts elicited by the interaction as a decision to put to what he said on hold. In other words, I suspected it was important but didn’t yet know why. Therefore, by 1) placing the directive on “hold,” I was able to 2) situate his response in a broader pattern of objections and 3) make sense of the conflicts between him and other research participants that would later emerge. Instead of demonstrating that I should have changed my “wrong” question to reflect one that my interlocutor thought of as “valid,” my handling of this interaction held the answer to bigger-picture questions.

### **Putting Checks, Doubts, and Contradictions on Hold**

Putting an objection on hold makes it possible to avoid haphazard responses to unexpected developments during field research, including unanticipated friction with participants. As I noted in the introduction, significant political developments were unfolding around the time of my informal interview with Thorvaldur. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, a historically unprecedented Social Democratic Alliance/Left-Green government (elected in 2009) initiated the European Union accession process. However, in 2013, a coalition

consisting of the Eurosceptic, center-right Progressive and Independence parties returned to power, despite having shouldered popular blame for the unsustainable financial expansion of the preceding decade. When I began my major fieldwork in early 2014, the government moved to withdraw Iceland's pending EU application. Between February and April 2014, thousands of people gathered in the parliament square to protest the ruling coalition, claiming that the government reneged on its campaign promise of a referendum on the future of the EU accession process.

Although Progressive and Independence parties resumed control of the national government, the Reykjavik city council remained a stronghold of protest politics and the Icelandic center-left. The SDA was energized by popular outrage at the national government. In fact, some of the protest events were initiated by members of the party's youth organization. Because nearly a third of Iceland's total population lived in the city, the city council served as a substantial countervailing force against Althingi (the national parliament). Much was at stake for the SDA in the municipal election and at the time of my conversation with Thorvaldur.

In hindsight, I made three decisions after that interaction that shaped how my fieldwork would unfold. First, I decided that I lacked sufficient perspective to adjudicate Thorvaldur's objection. Because I had only spent three months in the field, I simply didn't have enough data to compare. Furthermore, due to the EU protests and municipal election, many of my interactions at that point had been with SDA members, which was not the only group I intended to work with. In this instance, inclusivity demanded that I not unduly privilege some participants' perspectives on the project. I held off on deciding whether my question was "right" or "wrong," but would later realize that the significance of the interaction lay elsewhere.

Second, I decided that his objection was nevertheless worth keeping in mind. I *did* have enough perspective and data to recognize that the interaction could have implications for the project and its findings. The decision to withdraw the EU application shifted public debate considerably since I first formulated the project. Third, because my informal interview with Thorvaldur took place during a moment of political disruption, I decided to wait for the election before reconsidering his check on my question. Between the recent national election, the protests, and the upcoming municipal election I suspected that SDA sympathizers were unusually agitated. If the collective outrage over the EU application were to blow

over, I wanted to find out how they might respond to my questions once the dust settled.

### **Situate Objections in Context**

Although member-checking embraces sustained, reciprocal research relationships, it can ignore how participants' responses are shaped by time, place, and social position. Over time, my accumulated interactions made it possible to situate Thorvaldur's objection to my question in the context of several political developments that emerged during my fieldwork.

For example, my initial research trip to Iceland in June 2013 came just a few weeks after the post-financial crisis government, led by the SDA and the Left-Green Movement, was ousted. On that trip, I attended a public talk given by an SDA member of parliament. During the question and answer period, I asked how, after the financial crisis, Iceland avoided Greece's sovereign debt problems. The latter was in the Eurozone and was subject to the European Central Bank's demands for austerity policies. In contrast, the Icelandic government avoided a sovereign debt crisis by implementing capital controls, devaluing the currency, and repudiating responsibility for private banks' debts. However, the MP not only rejected the comparison ("Iceland is *nothing* like Greece") but also declared, "being a member of the Euro would have prevented the crash in the first place" (because it would have prevented the króna from becoming overvalued) (public lecture, University of Iceland, June 2013). Like Thorvaldur, the MP appeared to object to the question itself. Non-membership of the Eurozone was Iceland's downfall, not its saving grace.

It was only through accumulated interactions of this sort that I came to understand why it was that some participants might reject questions that assumed a critical stance on the EU. For EU supporters, it was a debate that was too easy to shut down by making, for example, appeals to the sanctity of Iceland's independence. A dramatic departure from the status quo, the post-crisis SDA/Left-Green government presented an unusual opportunity to put accession on the public agenda. In early 2014, the ruling coalition's rationale for declining to hold a referendum on whether Iceland should continue talks signaled the reconsolidation of hegemonic Euroscepticism. Since voters had elected parties that were explicitly opposed to EU membership, the coalition reasoned, there was no point in holding a referendum. The Progressive and Independence parties would not pursue membership under any circumstances. If the electorate really wanted a referendum, the coalition

claimed, voters would have supported parties for whom EU membership was an open question.

Much later, I realized that more or less overt objections to my questions connected Thorvaldur, the MP, and numerous other interactions. Only then was I able to make sense of Thorvaldur's directive. In order to forestall considerations that would shut down the debate about joining, he framed the accession question in terms of the risks that remaining outside of the Eurozone posed to Iceland's ability to support social democracy. In contrast, my question reflected the prevailing scholarly consensus at the time, which held that Eurozone members like Greece faced constrained prospects for economic recovery (Kolb 2011; Blyth 2013; Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou, and Exadaktylos 2014). My critical framing of the question made it incompatible with Thorvaldur's attitude toward the EU. Yet if I had shifted my approach based on his directive, I wouldn't have experienced the repeated objections that enabled me to later identify the boundaries of pro-European discourse.

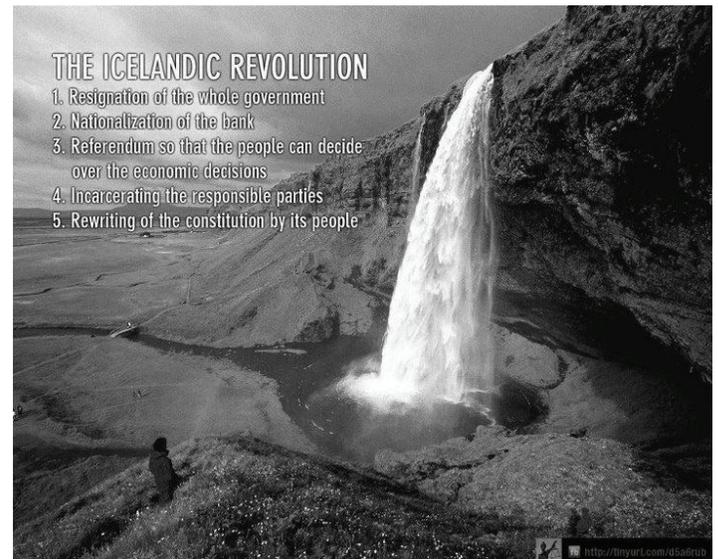
### Make Sense of Conflicts

Member-checking implies that participants are authorities on both their own lives and on their group precisely because they are members of it. However, during fieldwork, it can obscure conflicts among participants because it can lead the researcher to reify participants' "groupness" (Brubaker 2002; Desmond 2014). The researcher might make problematic *a priori* assumptions about which participants should be included as members of a particular group. Consequently, the researcher also risks relying on check-backs that overlook divergent interpretations among different participants in the project. Instead, the researcher can approach the task of making sense of conflicts as an integral part of co-creating knowledge.

I initially conceived of each participant as a "member" of a targeted sample consisting of people who participated in contentious politics since 2008. However, I later found that this conceptualization submerged conflicts among and between participants. About a year after I met Thorvaldur, I interviewed Jóhann, a participant in the 2010 protests around the failed Icesave bank. That interview revealed deep fissures between different groups involved in protests since the financial crisis. Jóhann and Thorvaldur expressed such starkly contradictory interpretations of events and of each other that it is unlikely that either would "validate" findings that took both perspectives seriously.

Since 2008, protests in Iceland involved a number of claims that seemed internally consistent in the context of subsequent post-crisis protest movements on continental Europe. One meme circulating through social media around 2012-2014 enumerated the purported accomplishments of the so-called "Icelandic Revolution" (see Figure 1, below).

Figure 1: A widely circulated meme outlining the "Icelandic Revolution" (source unknown, ca. 2012).



The "referendum" in item 3 refers to two referenda that were held over the Icesave debt. When Iceland's banks collapsed in 2008, around 300,000 customers in the United Kingdom and Netherlands countries lost savings held in online banks that offered high-yield savings accounts. One of these banks was Icesave. Normally, deposits would be protected by an insurance mechanism, but due to the scale of the collapse and the rapid depreciation of the króna, Iceland's deposit insurance scheme ran out before all foreign priority depositors were reimbursed. In the meantime, the UK and the Netherlands reimbursed their citizens and demanded immediate repayment from Iceland. For Thorvaldur and the SDA, these events confirmed that Iceland should join the EU. Iceland's volatile currency and non-EU status exacerbated the crisis because the former made repayment more expensive and the latter deprived Iceland of international assistance.

However, Jóhann perceived the opposite. As an Icesave protester, he demanded that the government hold a referendum on whether it should issue a sovereign guarantee. In his view, the UK and Dutch governments' attempts to "bully" Iceland into a sovereign guarantee against Icesave confirmed his suspicion that more

powerful EU states had no problem infringing upon smaller states' sovereignty. By putting Thorvaldur's account in dialogue with Jóhann's, I recognized that despite the appearance of victory for critics of the establishment writ large, pro-European and anti-Icesave participants in fact harbored a deep disagreement over the issue of sovereign debt after the financial crisis. Thorvaldur, characterizing all Euroscepticism as irrational and anachronistic, had dismissed anti-Icesave protesters as "xenophobic nationalists" who had no compelling reason to object to EU accession. In contrast, Jóhann suggested that SDA members were "blinded" to the facts of the case due to their singular determination to join the EU.

Since pro-European Icelanders were associated with the ideological center-left, it was tempting to assume that their views on the Icesave debt would be consistent with other parts of the post-crisis SDA platform, such as the call for a new constitution. If the SDA saw the financial crisis as symptomatic of deep-set problems in Iceland's democracy, surely they would object to nationalization of private debts, which would transfer responsibility to the population as a whole. Instead, the party saw cooperation with the European Free Trade Area's (EFTA) demands for a sovereign guarantee on the debts as a prerequisite for a fast and painless EU accession. In contrast, Jóhann framed the guarantee as an unacceptable incursion against Iceland's sovereignty.

The SDA/Left-Green government would hold two referenda on proposed Icesave repayment deals. Voters twice rejected the proposals due in part to the demand for a sovereign guarantee. In response, the UK and Netherlands brought a suit against Iceland in the EFTA court. Contrary to its own preferences, the ruling coalition was forced to defend the referendum outcome. By early 2013, EFTA had ruled in Iceland's favor. For the Progressive and Independence parties, the decision vindicated their misgivings about EU membership, and they made the Icesave debacle part of their 2013 election platforms. Their stance on the debts ultimately helped deliver them back into power.

The conflicts that surfaced through my interactions with Thorvaldur and Jóhann unraveled my understanding of the Icelandic Revolution. Although they were both members of my research, it wasn't appropriate to think of Thorvaldur and Jóhann as members of an otherwise coherent group. Not only did their party allegiances diverge, their interpretations of events and their respective positionalities also contradicted each other. Had I taken Thorvaldur's characterization of anti-Icesave protesters

at face value, and adapted my research question to his directive, I might not have pursued the interview with Jóhann. Thorvaldur and Jóhann both unequivocally dismissed each other's claims not only about what happened but also what questions the events raised. While I regarded both equally as experts on their own experiences of the financial crisis and its consequences, each thought the other was missing the point.

For that reason alone, it would be problematic to check back with either of them to *validate* findings that take both participants' perspectives seriously. However, that doesn't mean that member-checking is a futile exercise. Rather, it needs to be recognized as a continuous, recursive part of the research process and treated as a way of making space for conflict and doubt on the part of the researcher and participant alike. Because I put Thorvaldur's objection on hold instead of either dismissing it or reframing my project around it, I acquired an understanding of why he rejected the basic premise of my question. Eventually, his objection generated insight into a broader set of developments, including the establishment parties' return to power, and protest over the status of the EU application.

## Conclusion

As the concept of member-checking is presently understood, Thorvaldur's declaration that I was "asking the wrong question" represented an unexpected "check" on the validity of my research-in-progress. On the one hand, treating Thorvaldur's objection as such a "check" was potentially valuable because it prompts the researcher to take a more inclusive, sustained, and egalitarian approach towards participants. This potentially reveals faulty assumptions a researcher might have brought to the field. On the other hand, member-checking doesn't advise the researcher on how to respond to objections and directives that surface while the research is in progress (whether solicited or not). Because I expected the project's contours to change, I was deeply unsettled by Thorvaldur's declaration that I was asking the wrong question. However, as there is little guidance available for interpretive (field) researchers on the process by which questions and projects change, I was on the lookout for signals and thought that perhaps his directive was the clearest signal I was going to get.

Yet, as I later found, my questions were ultimately reshaped not by specific individuals' interventions but rather by the unpredictable nature of the changing context. Although separated by a year, my conversations with both Jóhann and Thorvaldur were marked by

protests over the EU application, municipal elections, lifting capital controls, and ongoing discontent about a yet-to-be-implemented constitutional measure that would have made it possible to force referenda by petition. The various controversies and conflicts that arose during my time in Iceland influenced where I went, whom I met, what participants had to say, and what conflicts and common ground animated our discussions.

Asking questions that provoked confrontational responses turned out to be revelatory in its own right. Thorvaldur's objection revealed an unexpected puzzle, but it did not invalidate my question. Instead, his objection pushed me to figure out what his objection meant. *Why* did he think my question was wrong?

Why did other SDA members also appear to bristle at criticisms of the EU? Eventually, my accumulated data revealed that pro-European Icelanders like Thorvaldur sometimes dealt with the hegemonic Euro-sceptic consensus by also treating the question of joining the EU as though the rationale was equally self-evident and incontrovertible. My tasks then became making sense of the broader context in which our exchange occurred and disagreements between my participants. Ultimately, Thorvaldur's claim that I was "asking the wrong question" generated insights into post-crisis political developments in Iceland that I would not have discovered had I either haphazardly adapted my research to his intervention, or if I had simply cast his remark aside.

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