

take the notion of “messy text” from Marcus (1998).

⁵ Mine is however an exploratory study. In future, more comprehensive tests, random sampling of regions is advisable.

⁶ Sztompka engages in “the search for underlying *patterns for thinking and doing*, (original emphasis), commonly shared among the members of society, and therefore external and constraining with respect to each individual member” (1993:87).

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Shouts and Murmurs: The Ethnographer’s Potion

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Breaking News: Political Scientists Announce Invention of Invisibility Potion!

In a stunning disciplinary upheaval unparalleled since the mid-20th century publication of Robert Dahl’s “Epitaph for a Monument to a Successful Protest,” political scientists spilled from their offices and gathered in campus quads to celebrate today’s announcement of the invention of the Fieldwork Invisibility Potion, or FIP.¹ The culmination of decades of top-secret research funded by the Special Operations Branch of the Social Science Directorate of the National Science Foundation, today’s release of FIP allows for the first time the possibility of ethnographic field research uncontaminated by observer-observed interactions. Various terms, “bias” and “subjectivity” by leading political science practitioners, these observer-observed interactions have long plagued the quest for a replicable, objective, and systematic ethnographic method. With FIP’s invention, such sources of uncontrolled error in ethnographic research may very well join flat-earth theories, witch burning, and medical bloodletting in the dustbin of prescientific history.

“The observer effect has been a known feature of theoretical physics and quantum mechanics since Heisenberg first articulated it in the early part of the 20th century,” remarked an ecstatic Dr. Popper Will Falsify, Principal Investigator on the FIP project. “So it’s no small irony that it should be the social sciences that discovered the key to overcoming the Heisenberg effect in studies of the social world. I believe FIP may very well usher in a new era of comity between the so-called social and natural sciences.”

Unsurprisingly for a discipline as fraught as political science, however, initial reactions from leading practitioners to the invention of FIP have been anything but unanimous.

Those working within a logic of inquiry informed broadly by positivist commitments are cautiously optimistic about the potential for FIP to add credibility and rigor to fieldwork conducted by political scientists. “Unfortunately,” stated Dr. Cy N. Salthaway in an interview conducted at the prestigious Institute for Cumulative Knowledge, “politicians and governments often have a vested interest in portraying certain images of their societies. Ethnography, in-depth immersion, and participant observation are sometimes the only ways of getting a better handle on realities as they actually exist on the ground. But the obvious advantages of immersive fieldwork that gets closer to ground level facts are diluted if not actually

reversed by their ‘just anecdotal’ quality, namely, that because the fieldworker is necessarily only observing interactions highly contingent on her location in time and space, there is really no way to systematize and generalize the data she collects. Of course, another important worry when it comes to researchers who rely extensively or exclusively on ethnographic research is that the data they collect is more an artifact of their presence than a reflection of what is actually there. Combined, these concerns make it exceedingly difficult for ethnography to justify itself as sufficiently systematic or replicable to qualify as science.”

As an example, Dr. Salthaway recounted a recent job talk at ICK’s Department of Political Science in which the job candidate had invested years to learn Malay and live in a remote Southeast Asian village of approximately seventy families. “There were some remarkably vivid descriptions of pilfering, gossip, and foot-dragging that came out of this fieldwork,” noted Dr. Salthaway, “but when a respected senior member of our department interrupted the candidate halfway through his talk to ask whether the research amounted to anything more than an anthropological monograph about a specific researcher living in a specific village at a specific historical moment, it really put a damper on things.”

“I’m loathe to throw the baby out with the bathwater,” continued Dr. Salthaway, “and it’s why I advocate what you might call a three-legged stool approach to the scientific study of politics. Under this approach, ethnography is immensely useful for generating hypotheses, exploring peculiar residuals that appear in statistical analyses, or helping the researcher uncover potential causal mechanisms linking dependent and independent variables. But, ultimately, to produce what I would consider truly valid scientific knowledge, ethnography must be subsumed within a broader research program in which the other two legs of the stool—statistical and formal analysis—serve to test, and ultimately verify or falsify, the hypotheses and hunches developed by fieldwork.”

Pressed on whether the invention of FIP changed his basic position, Dr. Salthaway said, “Well, it’s an interesting question. On the one hand, by containing the potential to eliminate entirely the participant in participant observation and produce a pure observer qua observer, it does strengthen the capacity of ethnography to be more objective. On the other hand, FIP does not do much for the ‘just anecdotal’ problem insofar as an observer, no matter how invisible, is still only observing highly specific interactions and settings. So ultimately, I think that even fieldwork conducted using FIP would still need to be combined with statistical and formal analysis.”

“I suppose you could say,” continued Dr. Salthaway as he leaned slightly forward on the dark red mahogany conference table, “that one anxiety I have is that by making ethnography somewhat more rigorous without overcoming all of its limitations, FIP may give the dangerous illusion of strengthening arguments for the stand-alone value of ethnography in political science. If you’ll indulge the extended metaphor, proponents of ethnography’s stand-alone value have always seemed to me a bit like creators of one-legged stools. Now, I grant you that one-legged stools might be very aesthetically

pleasing, they might make for wonderful conceptual or installation art, and it might even be possible to create an entire tradition or discipline of one-legged stools in which earlier styles are compared with later styles, different types of wood are employed for the stool, different varnishes are put on it, passionate debates erupt over whether this or that wood is more ethical and environmentally sustainable, over whether this or that kind of varnish better respects the underlying grain or “voice” of the wood, and so on and so forth. This kind of thing might continue to the point where these debates replace the actual making of stools as the primary concern of the one-legged stool school or tradition or discipline. But, ultimately, for those concerned with the advancement of *science*, all of this hyper-reflexivity and navel-gazing boils down to the rather straightforward question of whether you would ever want to sit on a one-legged stool. And just as no one would ever want to sit on a one-legged stool, no matter how beautifully crafted, so too would we be better off the sooner we abandoned the fantastical notion that stand-alone ethnography, absent a kind of disciplining or stabilization by statistical and formal analysis, serves to move the project of a scientific study of politics forward. FIP undoubtedly makes the ethnography leg of the three-legged stool of science stronger, but it does nothing to eliminate the need for the other two legs of the stool.”

“Now don’t get me wrong here,” Dr. Salthaway quickly added as he settled comfortably back into his chair. “I have the highest respect for Dr. Popper Will Falsify and what he has accomplished with the invention of FIP, but I just don’t think we’re quite there yet in terms of a truly scientific, truly replicable, truly systematic ethnographic capacity in political science.” Queried about what would be needed for such an ethnographic capacity, Dr. Salthaway smiled and said, “Oh, a time machine, for starters. And a do-over button. And a hermetically sealed social world in which our publications had no chance of being read by those they analyze, since that too might alter their behavior.” Asked if he was joking, Dr. Salthaway’s smile broadened as he chuckled good-naturedly and responded, “If someone had told you a month ago that an invisibility potion for ethnographers would soon be available would you have thought them joking?”

Political scientists working within interpretive logics of inquiry were equally guarded about the invention of FIP, but for very different reasons. Reached via satellite phone while conducting fieldwork on the reinvention of ancient dance traditions as modern forms of resistance to the high modern state among the Eveny reindeer herders of Northern Siberia, it took no small degree of persuading to convince Professor Maura D. Scripshon, founding member of a loose but increasingly influential affiliation of ethnographers in political science known as the Political Ethnography Collective, that FIP was not simply an elaborate hoax.

“Like all revolutions in technologies of observation and analysis from the microscope to the telescope to the explication of the bell curve to the development of ordinary least squares analysis to the delineation of fuzzy set analysis, this so-called FIP will no doubt be heralded by many as a breakthrough of magnificent proportions and magical possibilities,”

said an audibly skeptical Dr. Scripshon. “Fundamentally, however, I do not think the invention of FIP or any other optic technology obviates some of the basic, unavoidable questions facing the ethnographer and, by extension, all who take the social world as their focus of analysis. Indeed, a central motivation for organizing PEC, which now has close to forty active members and just celebrated its first anniversary last week, is the contention that the power of ethnography lies not only or even primarily in its capacity to get closer to the ground, to better ‘collect data’ as if data are like so many rocks lying about in a field, but rather precisely in the way ethnography forces us to confront the question of how we as researchers are implicated in the social worlds we study, to confront the ways we actually co-generate rather than simply collect data, and to confront the ways the knowledge we produce with this data travels back and alters the very social worlds it purports to explain.”

After excusing herself briefly to attend to a reindeer making strange clicking noises that interfered with the phone conversation, Dr. Scripshon continued, “The idea of neutrality or objectivity in fieldwork is an illusion because the participant observer is always intervening in specific relations and networks of power. Take as one example a researcher who studies social relations of production on a factory floor. Not only *what* but *how* that researcher sees is going to be intimately tied to whether or not she enters the factory as a guest of management or whether she enters as an entry-level line worker, just to contrast two starkly different positional embodiments the researcher might take. Further, the ethnographer is always situated at the intersection of multiple identities—racial, gendered, sexual, class, and so forth—and these impact not only how people in the field interpret and therefore respond to her but also how she herself filters her observations. So arguably, the more fraught the power relations in the field, the more accounting for these kinds of positionality matters to the quality of the research.”

“Forgive the Russia-inspired metaphor,” shouted Dr. Scripshon in an effort to be heard as the clicking reindeer noises grew into a concerted chorus of bellowing, “but this kind of researcher-specific positionality is really just the most obvious and least avoidable center of a successive series of matryoshka dolls. Ethnography’s attention to researcher-specific positionality is nested inside another ontological and epistemological doll that asks the researcher to explicitly account for the ways in which the underlying logic of inquiry used in the research channels a whole series of decisions of great import beginning with the framing of the research question to the way the researcher counts certain things as facts or observations relevant to the research and others as coincidental or unimportant. And this second ontological doll is itself nested within yet another, third doll that asks the researcher to locate her research project in relation to a larger disciplinary history that is connected to broader political projects, funding programs, and specific ideologies and interests. Empires deploy armies of scholars as well as armies of fighters, and the third level of this matryoshka doll asks the researcher to give an accounting of the *uses* of research, of the kinds of discourses

one’s research legitimizes and is in turn legitimized by, and of the likely effects—intended and unintended—of those discourses on the subjects of research and the broader social and political worlds they inhabit.”

Pressed on whether the invention of FIP altered her matryoshka doll approach to ethnography, Dr. Scripshon responded, “The strength of ethnography, even for those who will never use ethnographic research methods, is that as a method it is especially suited to surfacing troubling and important questions about positionality and power at the level of the researcher, the level of underlying logics of inquiry, and at the level of the discipline itself. Arguably, all research methods in political science—methods ranging from immersive ethnography to elite interviewing to survey research to focus groups to regression analysis to formal modeling—implicitly or explicitly provide answers or a range of answers to the questions implied in a matryoshka doll approach. But because ethnography posits the embodied researcher as the instrument of research, it is unique as a method in inviting reflection on what is often silenced, controlled for, or completely neglected in other methods, namely, the central role of the researcher in co-generating knowledge about the social world and her positionality within unequal networks of power in co-generating that knowledge. What, after all, are the practices of research, the practices of producing knowledge and truth claims about the social world and publishing those claims in specialized legitimating forums, if not acts of intervention and meaning-making? Ethnography, in this sense, makes visible the degree to which the image of the objective social scientist dispassionately removed from the worlds she studies is nothing more than a convenient—if sometimes productive and enabling—fiction, a fiction that both produces and reproduces certain power effects in the social worlds it studies. And so the accompanying worry for me, when it comes to FIP, is that rather than rendering such questions about power and positionality irrelevant, FIP simply makes them even less likely to be surfaced within the discipline of political science by furthering what can ultimately only ever be an *illusion* of invisibility.”

Asked whether she would consider using FIP during her fieldwork amongst the Eveny, Dr. Scripshon laughed and said, “Do you hear those reindeer in the background? I really must go feed them before they start a stampede. But in response to your question, let me just ask if after three years of slowly building rapport with this community and countless bruises and not a few broken bones from trying to master the impossible art of riding smelly reindeer across the tundra, you really think I would squander all that hard work by swallowing some potion that makes me disappear with a puff and a poof?”

Drs. Salthaway and Scripshon’s contrasting reactions to FIP suggest that disagreements over the place and value of ethnographic research in political science are rooted in longstanding disciplinary debates defying easy resolution. Meanwhile, political science departments and Institutional Review Boards are scrambling to deal with the practical implications of FIP’s imminent release. In an effort to attract the most competitive Ph.D. applicants, some top departments are already promising funding and specialized methods courses to support FIP-

enabled fieldwork while other departments are embroiled in debates over whether FIP ought to be reserved for tenured faculty, at least in its initial years of use. And in keeping with the patchwork system of university-specific Institutional Review Board procedures, some IRB committees are all but requiring ethnographers to use FIP in the field, arguing that harm to subjects is radically reduced by the invisibility of the researcher, while other IRB committees have taken an opposite approach, equating invisibility with a kind of deception which requires a special and difficult to obtain exemption from standard informed consent requirements.

For Principal Investigator Dr. Popper Will Falsify, the intellectual and pragmatic debates ignited by the invention of FIP only serve to underscore its revolutionary importance for political science. “We may very well be standing at a historic junction,” he stated confidently. “In one hundred years, the history of political science may be divided simply into pre-FIP and post-FIP. Real progress has been made. There will be no turning back.”

Note

¹ This essay is a playful thought experiment. For their insights, I thank, without implicating, Lisa Bjorkman, Lee Ann Fujii (who, among other things, came up with names for Drs. Salthaway and Scripshon), Clarissa Hayward, Courtney Jung, Brandon Koenig, Jan Kubik, Dorian Warren, Lisa Wedeen, Emily Wills, and Dvora Yanow. And, a special thanks to Ed Schatz for organizing the 2009 Toronto APSA roundtable on Ethnography in Political Science and for editing this symposium.

Studying Politics with an Ethnographic and Historical Sensibility

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What are the implications of studying political phenomena where we don't know the outcome?¹ How might we think through the differences in studying political events, interactions, processes and outcomes in “real-time,” compared to historical approaches, where we study important events that have already happened (whether social movements, political change, etc.)? I come at these questions wearing two methodological hats within American politics: one as a political ethnographer, and the other as a toiler in the historically-oriented subfield of American political development. My use of political ethnography as an approach primarily rests on neo-positivist and realist ontological assumptions (Schatz 2009; Kubik 2009; Allina-Pisano 2009; Shapiro 2005). It is from these assumptions that I argue there are consequential differences when studying events or processes in hindsight versus real-time. I draw on my own fieldwork on diversity in American labor unions, union organizational change, and anti-Wal-Mart political campaigns to examine these issues.

Historical Approaches Meet Ethnography

While Ed Schatz reminds us that political ethnography does not exist in a methodological vacuum vis-à-vis the discipline of political science, there has been little explicit engagement of the recent revival of ethnography with the “historical turn” in political science (McDonald 1996). Responding to the rise and dominance of positivism and the post-war behavioral revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, the late 1970s ushered in a resurgence of history and historical approaches to big questions in the American social sciences (McDonald 1996; Sewell 1996; Steinmo et al. 1992; Orren and Skowronek 2004; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). Scholars seeking clues to the causes and consequences of social revolutions, the emergence and development of social welfare states, or the causes and meanings of political change turned to historical research and historiography to gain a different type of causal leverage unique from quantitative behavioral assumptions (Brady and Collier 2004). In sociology, this became institutionalized as comparative-historical research and political sociology, while in political science it took the form of historical institutionalism in dual and often bifurcated comparative and American versions.²

In his methodological primer on the discipline and practice of history, Chicago-School historian Louis Gottschalk (1969) discusses the inherent limitations facing historians and historical research: “Most human affairs happen without leaving vestiges or records of any kind behind them. The past, having happened, has perished forever without occasional traces...only a small part of what happened in the past is ever observed” (45). He continues by discussing the vast majority of “unobserved happenings” in the world,

And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to the historians' attention; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian. (45)

Gottschalk goes on to make a distinction between “history-as-actuality” and “history-as-record”, arguing that history can only be told from “history-as-record,” or the “surviving records of what happened” (46). But ethnographers in this sense are also historians; we document, from our own and from actors' experiences whom we observe, history-as-actuality. An ethnographic standpoint allows the recording of a history in real-time, the making of history, as it were.

If true, then ethnographers perhaps engage in real-time historiography.³ As observers, we write a history as political actors make it. Instead of reconstructing a past, we “imaginatively construct” the present. The ethnographer is herself a primary source of her data, while also documenting the testimonies of other primary sources.⁴ Indeed, the first of Gottschalk's four general rules for significance given to historical documents is concerned with temporality, albeit from a neo-positivist perspective: