

Subversive Knowledge in Times of Global Political Crisis: A Manifesto for Ethnography in the Study of International Relations

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Abstract: This paper explores the promises and pitfalls of using ethnographic methods to analyze global politics in turbulent times. Ethnography has not gone unnoticed by international relations (IR) scholars, but the method remains at the fringes of the discipline. While acknowledging more recent feminist and practice theorist contributions to ethnographic research in IR, this paper brings together contemporary research across diverse issue areas, ranging from humanitarian intervention to transnational migration, to ask about ethnography's larger contribution to understanding global politics: What kinds of knowledge does ethnography produce about IR? In what ways might ethnography, informed by local perspectives, challenge top-down approaches to the study of IR? We identify three primary justifications for ethnographic methods based on different, though overlapping, forms of knowledge that they can uncover: tacit knowledge, marginalized knowledge, and subversive knowledge. We acknowledge issues that complicate access, and we warn that ethnographers are far from immune to the imperialist arrogance of mainstream methodologies. Ultimately, we call for reflexive scholarship to navigate the international politics of a "post-truth" and post-Covid world.

Resumen: Este documento explora las promesas y los escollos del uso de métodos etnográficos para analizar la política global en tiempos turbulentos. La etnografía no ha pasado desapercibida para los investigadores de Relaciones Internacionales (RRII), pero el método permanece al margen de la disciplina. Si bien se reconocen las contribuciones feministas y teóricas prácticas más recientes a la investigación etnográfica en RRII, este documento reúne investigaciones contemporáneas en diversas áreas temáticas, que varían desde la intervención humanitaria hasta la migración transnacional, para interrogar sobre la mayor contribución de la etnografía a la comprensión de la política global: ¿Qué tipo de conocimiento produce la etnografía sobre las relaciones internacionales? ¿De qué manera la etnografía, fundamentada por las perspectivas locales, podría desafiar los enfoques descendientes para el estudio de las RRII? Identificamos tres fundamentos principales para los métodos etnográficos basados en formas de conocimiento diferentes, aunque coincidentes, que pueden revelar: el conocimiento tácito, el conocimiento marginado y el conocimiento subversivo. Reconocemos los problemas que complican el acceso y advertimos que los etnógrafos están lejos de ser inmunes a la arrogancia imperialista de las metodologías dominantes. En última instancia, pedimos un estudio reflexivo para hacer frente a la política internacional de un mundo "posverdad" y "poscovid."

Extrait: Cet article explore les promesses et pièges de l'utilisation de méthodes ethnographiques pour analyser la politique internationale en des temps troubles. L'ethnographie n'est pas passée inaperçue dans les recherches en relations internationales, mais la méthode reste en marge de la discipline. Cet article reconnaît les contributions plus récentes des féministes et des théoriciens de la pratique aux recherches ethnographiques en relations internationales tout en rassemblant des recherches contemporaines dans divers domaines, allant de l'intervention humanitaire à la migration transnationale, le but étant de s'interroger sur la contribution plus large de l'ethnographie à la compréhension de la politique mondiale: Quels types de connaissances l'ethnographie produit-elle au sujet des relations internationales? De quelle manière l'ethnographie, éclairée par des perspectives locales, pourrait-elle remettre en question les approches du haut vers le bas de l'étude des relations internationales? Nous avons identifié trois principales justifications d'utiliser des méthodes ethnographiques en nous basant sur des formes de connaissances différentes, bien qu'elles se chevauchent, que ces méthodes pourraient permettre de dévoiler: des connaissances tacites, des connaissances marginalisées et des connaissances subversives. Nous reconnaissons que des problèmes compliquent l'accès à ces méthodes, et nous avertissons que les ethnographes sont loin d'être immunisés contre l'arrogance impérialiste des méthodologies traditionnelles. En définitive, nous appelons à des recherches réflexives pour naviguer dans la politique internationale du monde « post-vérité » et « post-Covid ».

Keywords: international relations, ethnography, methodology, anthropology

Palabras clave: Relaciones Internacionales, etnografía, metodología, antropología

Mots clés: relations internationales, ethnographie, méthodologie, anthropologie

Introduction

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries named “post-truth” its word of the year. Defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief,” it signals the polarized nature of contemporary politics and the continuing rise of far-right populism in the United States, Europe, and beyond. In both rhetoric and policy actions, politicians have attacked the public value of scientific authority and technocratic expertise (Davies 2017). Meanwhile, racist stereotypes, anecdotes, and baseless “alternative facts” sway democratic publics. Most recently, the Covid-19 crisis has thrown these dynamics into stark relief, as the US government, under Donald Trump’s leadership, repeatedly dismissed policy recommendations of its own medical experts. In response, sizable segments of the public turned to conspiracy theories rather than the scientific community for guidance.

In previous decades, social scientists have often failed to critically engage with policy. For example, in the field of heterodox political economy, critical scholars have traced the origins of the 2008 global economic crisis, as well as other socio-economic dislocations, to the influence of dogmatic neoliberal economists’ “short-sightedness and ultimate hubris” (DeMartino 2011, 168; 2018). Across the globe, neoliberal social policies, from housing to education, employment, healthcare, and policing, have re-entrenched inequalities rather than alleviate them (Fischer 2020;

Stiglitz 2019). As Andrew Fischer (2020, 376) argues, in this context, “the naïveté of most of the current scholarship on social policy in developing countries is striking ... Whether due to vested interests or simply ideational conditioning, these agendas have advanced narrow residualist visions of social policy while at the same time being complicit—whether consciously or inadvertently—in neoliberal policy agendas more generally.” Opportunist populists then capitalized upon the resulting socioeconomic insecurity and the public distaste for technocratic policy justifications.¹ Thus, we can read the recent illiberal turn in global politics, in part, as a rejection of this neoliberal globalization (DeMartino 2018; Grabel 2018; Nelson 2018).

In this way, we live in a global moment eerily reminiscent of the eve of World War II. In that era, Karl Polanyi (1944) argued that unbridled free-market liberalism and its attendant ideology had ultimately triggered a political backlash (DeMartino 2018). The 2020s, much like the turbulent 1920s, promises to be “a decade marked by an increased focus on imperialism, white supremacy, and the prospects of race war” (Vitalis 2015, 21). IR scholars of that previous era participated in “silence and evasion” about the racialized origins and imperial complicities of their academic discipline (Vitalis 2000, 333). While some contemporary scholars have been working to break these silences, a preoccupation with the perpetuation of global power structures has quietly dominated the field since that time (cf. Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014; Zvobgo and Loken 2020).

In a political milieu of renewed turbulence, the importance of scholarship that produces subversive knowledge to engage with the world around us is ever more urgent. Subversive knowledge unsettles common-sense understandings and has the potential to disrupt politics. This importance is compounded, and also made more difficult to realize, by the fact that universities are simultaneously threatened by cuts and closures under conditions of pandemic economics, government austerity, extraordinary labor competition without effective workers’ protection, and cyberbullying that encourages self-censorship. These academic spaces are key sites for potential complicity with imperialist global political projects, as well as struggles against them. Their influence on the practice of IR is not limited to direct policy relevance but instead includes knowledge circulation that potentially challenges or legitimates dominant ideologies (Vitalis 2015, 3). Both quantitative and positivist qualitative methods can produce IR knowledge that subverts global politics as usual. However, we argue that ethnography is particularly well positioned for this task, providing means to investigate multiple worldviews through reflexive and systematic research that avoids the hubris of contemporary mainstream social science. In so doing, ethnography may provide a new basis for reasoned engagement between academic, public, and policy worlds (Forrest 2017).

We are motivated by a sense of urgency in the midst of a global pandemic and increased state repression in reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as continued migrant deaths in the Mediterranean Sea and the Sonoran Desert. This urgency, coupled with quarantine that deepens mobility restrictions, has propelled us to revisit the potential contribution of ethnography in the field of IR. We argue that ethnographies can provide a particular form of critical research, rooted in subversive, marginalized, and tacit knowledge, which remains largely absent in IR scholarship, still dominated by positivist research. Although claims of an “ethnographic turn” in the discipline appear as early as the 1980s (Vrasti 2008, 279), resurface periodically, and have recently received renewed interest (e.g., Brigg and Bleiker 2008; Jackson 2008; Aronoff and Kubik 2013; Betts and Orchard 2014, 19), a dearth of ethnographic work on global issues persists in IR as a Political Science

¹This narrative is arguably an emergent consensus. However, a more careful examination of the relationship between academic hubris, neoliberal policy, socioeconomic insecurity, political backlash, and a “post-truth” mentality is beyond the scope of this review. For example, we have not touched on the role of information technologies. Our intention is not to provide a definitive, detailed analysis of the context in this article, but instead to rethink international relations (IR) methods in this evolving and uncertain context.

discipline. To support our argument, in the first section, we define ethnography and reflexivity. Second, we briefly review the intellectual history of the method within the discipline, demonstrating that its presence has been limited. Third, we outline three forms of ethnographic knowledge—tacit, marginalized, and subversive—and their potential contribution. Finally, we discuss the challenges and potential pitfalls of ethnographic methods. We acknowledge issues that complicate access and we warn that ethnographers are far from immune to the imperialist arrogance of mainstream methodologies. Ultimately, we call for reflexive scholarship to navigate the international politics of a ‘post-truth’ and post-Covid reality.

Defining Ethnography

Ethnography is a research method that, undertaken with appropriate sensitivity, can offer the benefit of systematic, rule-based engagement with empirical facts without the conceits of mainstream social science. Tilly (2006) argues that ethnography is a form of craftsmanship with a clear set of intersubjective disciplinary standards for evaluation, rather than either pure art or science. Summarizing these interdisciplinary standards, Richardson (2000) maintains that ethnography should be a well-written, self-conscious, and systematic work that resonates with the reader as a credible and valuable depiction of the “real” social world under study. In this craft, ethnographers perform participant observation: the practice of immersing themselves in the lives, material and social environment, and daily activities of a group of people for an extended period of time. This method might be described as a systematic imagining about what life is like for another person, requiring some proximity to their lives to do so effectively. Ethnography is, by definition, an embodied research practice. As a result of this face-to-face confrontation with humanity during fieldwork, ethnographers often (though not always) develop an acute awareness of the politics of knowledge production, a critical analytical position toward the evaluation of de-personalized data, and a comfortable relationship with the incomplete nature of multiple truths. The methods and methodology together tend to produce an ontological position “in which it is entirely normal for meanings to be unsettled, plural and contested” (Schatz 2017, 136).

At its best, the knowledge produced by this craftsmanship represents a synthesis of local knowledges and expert authority. Extended time in the field allows an ethnographer multiple perspectives, shifting between the emic and etic (i.e., that of an insider and outsider identity position). Ethnographic practice blurs those boundaries by generating new relationships, identities, and knowledge shaped by fieldwork engagement.

Reflexivity remains at the core of ethnographic practice: an awareness of one’s position in the world and how that position becomes entangled with power are essential. This entanglement occurs through preexisting conceptual categories and overlapping relationships that complicate social roles, including that of a researcher. Rather than simply highlighting “the personal” as a source of bias, this awareness may be a source of ethnographic insight. Reflexive contemplation can point to the limits of our understanding of the world. Thus, reflexivity, as a methodological tool, highlights the otherwise unseen ruptures and blind spots in our own worldview. This recognition confirms the lack of a universal Truth or universal concepts. However, it does not necessarily lead to a “post-truth” world but instead should create opportunities for creative engagement with a fluid, protean world (Seybert and Katzenstein 2018).

These multiple perspectives and the capacity to create new identity positions for researchers and participants alike give ethnography value in uncertain times. In other words, ethnography is not a “post-truth” methodology; it is an intellectual exercise that critically interrogates truths without asserting claims to a singular Truth. Ethnographers do not rely on “alternative facts” (a codeword for untruths) but

instead engage the complexity of meaning making, exploring how lived experience renders particular narratives and facts believable, making them socially and politically consequential. Ethnographers inductively probe the limits of the social imagination, allowing space for both ambiguity and reason. In summary, we define ethnography as a set of on-the-ground, inductive research methods for understanding worldviews and leveraging the researcher's own humanity to do so.

In this way, we follow [Aradau and Huysmans' \(2014\)](#) approach to critical methods, which recasts methods as devices and acts that perform and intervene upon politics. Similarly, we believe that ethnography does not simply reflect particular ontological or epistemological commitments to interpretivism. The physical and intellectual practices associated with ethnographic fieldwork and reflection can actually generate or reinforce a humble epistemological position and agnostic ontological worldview. This is not to say that epistemology and ontology are unimportant. IR scholars have productively debated the assumptions that underpin epistemology (i.e., "how we know") and ontology (i.e., "the reality to be known") (e.g., [Hollis and Smith 1996](#)). In fact, such questions are intricately intertwined with the ethnographic project that we propose. The lived experiences of researchers engaged in ethnographic dialogue with people and daily practices around them may help reveal alternative understandings of knowledge and reality. Indeed, ethnography assumes an ontological view of a world with multiple truths and a ubiquity of power. It encourages a recognition of the irreconcilable intersubjectivity of our social worlds. Similarly, ethnography encourages an open epistemological position that recognizes our limited ability "to know" and our own embeddedness within a social world.

Ethnography and IR

Despite claims of an "ethnographic turn" in IR (e.g., [Vrasti 2008](#), 279; [Lie 2013](#)) and the many articles reviewing ethnographic work in IR (e.g., [Brigg and Bleiker 2008](#); [Jackson 2008](#); [Vrasti 2008](#)), ethnographic research remains limited within the discipline, dominated still by a positivist epistemology, especially in the United States. Daniel Maliniak and his colleagues found that 61 percent of academics surveyed in the United States identified as positivist. Moreover, 90 percent of articles published in the top twelve IR journals in 2014 were positivist in orientation ([Maliniak et al. 2018](#)). Thus, the most cutting-edge ethnographic work on IR-related topics has gravitated toward interdisciplinary venues, rather than IR as a discipline.

Counting Ethnographic Contributions to IR

In order to analyze ethnography's current place in the discipline, we examined eighteen leading IR journals and found only 106 articles based on original ethnographic research published between 2000 and 2019, less than 1 percent of all articles published during this time. As [figure 1](#) reveals, there does appear to be an upward trend with 25 percent of the ethnographic articles published in 2019.

In order to carry out this basic quantitative analysis, we identified the top twenty IR journals, published by the 2011 Teaching, Research and International Policy (TRIP) survey ([Maliniak, Peterson, and Tierney 2012](#)). While we are interested in the type of publications that might generate knowledge circulation between academic and policy realms (and hence our interest in the TRIP survey over a citation index, though the two are closely aligned), we excluded *Foreign Policy* and *Foreign Affairs*, both not peer-reviewed journals. In those public audience venues, authors often do not discuss their methods in detail, and we also expected some research to be duplicated from peer-reviewed journals. The subsequent 2014 and 2017 TRIP surveys only reported the top ten journals, which also appear in our list ([Maliniak et al. 2014, 2017](#)).

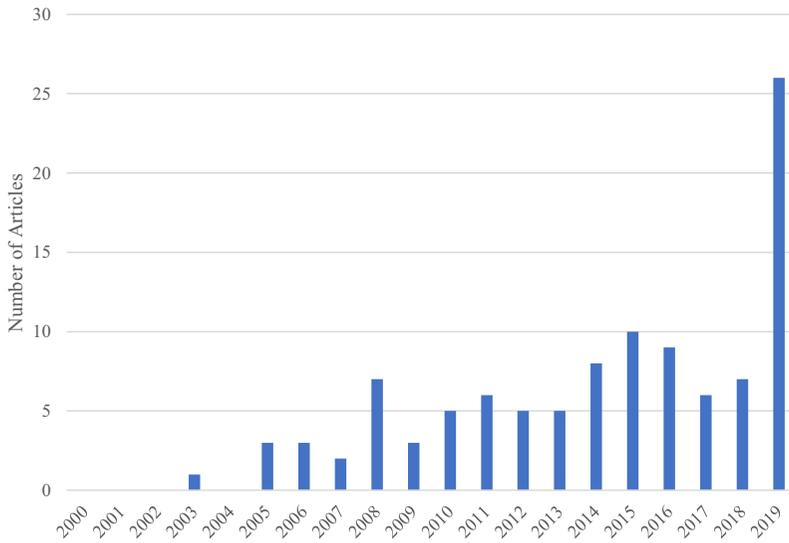


Figure 1. Ethnographic Research in Leading IR Journals, 2000–2019

Our use of the TRIP survey is not without limitations. The survey gathers data based on survey responses from academics and thus relies on perceptions from academics who (1) were surveyed and (2) chose to respond to the survey and answered the relevant question. Indeed, the responses omit important, more interdisciplinary journals, such as *International Political Sociology* and *Security Dialogue*, which attract a good deal of excellent work from IR scholars, and relatively more ethnographic work.² While these two journals are often read by International Studies Association (ISA) members, who largely identify as IR scholars, that audience is significantly more diverse, in terms of both discipline and institutional geography, than the IR subsection of the American Political Science Association (APSA). While we believe this speaks well of ISA as an organization, APSA remains a key gatekeeper in US-based IR as a discipline. Relatedly, the metrics that increasingly constrain hiring, promotion, and tenure practices further entrench publishing hierarchies reflected in the TRIP survey, despite the more pluralist approach to scholarship and publishing taken by some IR departments, especially outside the United States. These metrics also constrain perceived risk taking in methods and in working with subversive knowledge. While not wanting to present a skewed picture of the discipline—as primarily US-based or as less pluralist than it is in reality—we maintain that the presence, or indeed absence, of ethnographic work in the top IR journals is a powerful indication of ethnography’s place in the discipline.

In each journal, we carried out a search for three terms—“ethnography,” “ethnographic,” and “participant observation”—in research articles published between 2000 and 2019. We began in the year 2000 as that marked the launch of the “Perestroika Movement,” a broad-based call for methodological pluralism in the discipline. In our searches, we were as inclusive as possible: where authors claimed their work as ethnographic, we included them. We also included those who did not label their work as “ethnography” or “ethnographic” but used participant observation as one of their methods. To avoid double counting, articles are included only in the first category they appear. For example, an article that described the research as “ethnography” and detailed the use of “participant observation” is only counted under “ethnography.” We include our results in [table 1](#).

²Indeed, they are places where we, especially as junior scholars, felt our work would be better received.

Table 1. Articles drawing on Ethnographic Research in IR Journals

Journal	Ethnography	Ethnographic	Participant observation	Total
1 <i>International Organization</i>	1	1	0	2
2 <i>International Studies Quarterly</i>	3	0	0	3
3 <i>International Security</i>	2	0	0	2
4 <i>American Political Science Review</i>	1	0	1	2
5 <i>World Politics</i>	0	2	1	3
6 <i>European Journal of International Relations</i>	7	0	10	17
7 <i>Journal of Conflict Resolution</i>	1	3	1	5
8 <i>Review of International Studies</i>	2	1	1	4
9 <i>Millennium: Journal of International Studies</i>	6	0	2	8
10 <i>American Journal of Political Science</i>	2	0	0	2
11 <i>International Affairs</i>	2	0	2	4
12 <i>Security Studies</i>	2	0	0	2
13 <i>Review of International Political Economy</i>	10	0	7	17
14 <i>Journal of Peace Research</i>	2	9	3	14
15 <i>International Studies Review</i>	0	1	6	7
16 <i>International Relations</i>	1	2	1	4
17 <i>Comparative Politics</i>	0	5	4	9
18 <i>Global Governance</i>	0	0	1	1
Total	42	24	40	106

As with any quantitative exercise, there were grey areas. For instance, we counted but did not include the twenty-three articles that reviewed “ethnography” as a method in the discipline but did not draw on original ethnographic research.³ These include, for example, the debate between Wanda [Vrasti \(2008, 2010\)](#) and Jason [Rancatore \(2010\)](#) in *Millennium* about the role of ethnography in IR.

We also took note of but did not include articles that could be considered interpretivist in their methodology but not ethnographic in their methods (cf. [Jackson 2008](#) for a discussion of this distinction). For instance, Iver [Neumann \(2002\)](#) analyzes how the linguistic turn in IR excludes the analysis of other types of action. Drawing on existing ethnographic work, he develops a model of culture as an interplay between discourse and practice. He then uses the model to examine Norwegian diplomatic practice. Neumann draws on interviews he conducted, but at no point in this particular article does he claim that the work is ethnographic.⁴ As we are interested in ethnography and ethnographic methods in particular, we have excluded articles whose authors, such as practice and feminist theorists, may embrace an interpretivist methodology but not draw on ethnographic methods. On the other hand, we have included practice theorists, feminists, and others when they have used participant observation or explicitly described their work as ethnographic.

Historical Narrative of Ethnography in IR

To make sense of these numbers, and the scant publications of original ethnographic work within the discipline, a brief history of critical methodologies and ethnographic methods in IR provides some clarity. In fact, where a movement toward ethnography has occurred within the discipline, scholars continue to disagree about its conceptual and methodological value. Feminist scholars first illustrated

³We note here the irony of writing another review article in order to lament the dearth of ethnographic research in IR.

⁴In other articles on Norwegian diplomacy, Neumann does describe his work as “ethnographic” (see, e.g., [Neumann 2008](#)). In these instances, we have included the articles in our count.

how employing ethnographic methods to study international politics uncovered unexplored insights and truths (e.g., Cohn 1987; Moon 1997; Enloe 2000, 2001). Carol Cohn's (1987) piece based on participant observation and interviews is an early example of such scholarship that revealed how the technical yet gendered language of "defense intellectuals" both reflected and shaped US nuclear strategy.

More recently, scholars within the practice theory movement, like Iver Neumann (2002) and Vincent Pouliot (2007), have heralded ethnographic methods as a way to move beyond the linguistic turn that has dominated the discipline since the 1980s and a way to bridge discourse and material practice.⁵ Indeed, even critical scholarship in the discipline has tended to privilege discourse analysis, arguably at the expense of examining practice and the everyday. Similarly, human security studies published in IR journals have also favored a discursive approach, with little of this scholarship being grounded in fieldwork. IR work published outside of journals by university and academic presses could be seen as an exception (cf. Johnson 2014; Innes 2015; Brigden 2018; Mainwaring 2019, all of which rely on grounded fieldwork).

The minimal presence of ethnography in disciplinary journals is particularly striking in these two areas—critical scholarship and human security studies—where one might expect ethnographic methods to be especially productive. Despite important exceptions discussed here and below, most of the ethnographic work on international issues still comes from outside the discipline (e.g., Mountz and Loyd 2014; Andersson 2016) or is published by IR scholars in interdisciplinary journals (e.g., Cohn 1987; Brigden 2016; Mainwaring 2016). Thus, the fiction of a global world separate from the local is maintained, and the everyday, lived experience of IR is almost entirely absent from narrow disciplinary discussions.

Ethnographic Knowledge_s in the Post-Truth Era

When ethnographic methods have been employed in IR, criticism has been quick to follow. For example, Vrsti (2008, 280) argues that IR has adopted a "selective, instrumental and somewhat timid understanding of ethnography." More generally, anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff (1992, 7) observed that while ethnography was being challenged within anthropology during the 1980s and 1990s, it was being adopted as a "liberating method" in other fields. While acknowledging that, like any other methodology, ethnography comes with its own challenges (some of which we discuss later in the paper), we focus here instead on the possibilities that ethnography presents in the field of IR. Reviewing the contemporary political science subdiscipline of IR, we identify three primary justifications for ethnographic methods based on different, though overlapping, forms of knowledge: uncovering tacit knowledges, giving voice to marginalized knowledges, and generating subversive knowledges.

Tacit Knowledge

First, scholars view ethnographic methods as a means to retrieve *tacit* knowledge that can only be gained through embodied experience.⁶ In an argument reminiscent of Ted Hopf's (2002) "the logic of the everyday," Vincent Pouliot (2008) proposes "the logic of practicality." The logic of practicality emerges from lived

⁵In their book on practice theory, Bueger and Gadinger (2018, 131–32) suggest the idea of "praxiography" as a set of methods and techniques, noting that it has much in common with ethnography, but its focus is on practice (*praxis*) rather than culture (*ethno*). Indeed, although many of their arguments align with ours, our focus here is on what ethnography can contribute to the study of international relations. Thus, our focus is on participant observation as method, whereas Bueger and Gadinger (2018, 153–55) include a broader range of methods in their discussion of praxiography.

⁶Ethnographers are not the only scholars interested in tacit knowledge. Psychological approaches also seek to uncover what they characterize as unspoken "bias."

experience to capture the background understandings that cannot be coherently spoken or consciously understood. In this vein, Finn Stepputat (2012) draws on his first-hand experiences working with the Danish government to analyze its “international peace-support operations” in Afghanistan and Iraq. Stepputat describes the informal practices that produce policy knowledge, traces the multiple translations of organizational languages that create sites of contestation in that process, and ultimately argues that the creation of internal organizational unity is sometimes a more prominent goal than policy implementation.

Tacit knowledge can be marginalized, but not necessarily. Elite actors may engage in practice, creating tacit knowledges privileged everywhere but missing from our analyses. Experiential knowledges need not be the province of marginalized or ‘voiceless’ populations. Nor are they necessarily tied to a “local” context but can emerge from cosmopolitan cultural formations in transnational organizations, international institutions, or mobile epistemic communities (cf. Autesserre 2010). For example, Olivier Schmitt (2017) analyzes the ways in which routine decision-making, as well as procedural, linguistic, and spatial practices at NATO’s headquarters shaped the international security agenda in Afghanistan. Drawing on participant observation and interviews, Schmitt shows how a practice-based approach captures dynamics that differ and complement those emphasized by the classical narrative of the war in Afghanistan. Through participant observation, Schmitt reveals the importance of informal information sharing between the International Security and Assistance Forces in Afghanistan and the North Atlantic Council, which paved the way for NATO intervention. While this does not discount the political incentives that shaped NATO’s intervention in Afghanistan, it explains the context that made that decision possible.

Marginalized Knowledge

Second, scholars argue that ethnographic methods may be used to reveal *marginalized* knowledge of excluded actors. Ethnographic work provides an opportunity for diversifying worldviews and juxtaposing processes as seen from elite perspectives “above” to everyday actors “below.” For example, Severine Autesserre (2010) reveals a disconnect between local causes of conflict and the worldview of international humanitarian actors. Through an ethnographic analysis, Autesserre shows how international peacebuilders’ culture shaped the intervention in the Democratic Republic of Congo between 2003 and 2006, and ultimately led to its failure. The culture privileged national and regional causes of and solutions to violence, while marginalizing critical local dynamics and tensions. Thus, Autesserre not only reveals a local Congolese reality discounted by peacebuilders, but also reveals how the culture of those intervening is marginalized in scholarship on international interventions.

Of course, ethnographers are not the only scholars interested in marginalized knowledge. Survey research, interviews, and focus groups attempt to uncover some of this, but their deductive approach to informational “bias” is quite different than inductive ethnographic work. In contrast to survey methods, ethnography harnesses opportunities for reflexivity, resulting in the opportunity to be more radically “local” or co-authored. Ethnographers interpret narratives and research experience within a larger social context, reading them like a lived text. In other words, ethnographic interviews can be analyzed as a discourse that reveals meaningful patterns in the social imagination, as opposed to the collection of strictly factual data. This relation to interview narratives, fieldwork observations, and research participants stands in stark relief to the relation journalists maintain to their informants or that of survey researchers to their subjects. For the ethnographer, by contrast, the relationship between interviewer and participant is not a source of bias but a potentially revealing dynamic for inductive insights. Ethnographers actively leverage their own sensory, emotional, and individual experiences and identities to make discoveries,

rather than code such intrusions of the personal into fieldwork as “bias.” Ethnographers juxtapose social worlds to improvise new understandings as fieldwork surprises emerge. Thus, the openness of ethnographic knowledge production to influences from participants and the personal diverges sharply from more positivist research methods. However, even though this mode of research might be particularly attuned to unexpected discoveries of marginalized knowledge, ethnographers do not have monopoly claims on such knowledge.

Furthermore, despite the recognition that participant observation and ethnographic interviews are in some ways co-authored projects that allow for an inductive recovery of themes and impromptu revisions to research design in response to “local” input, many ethnographers are suspicious of naive calls to “give voice” to marginalized populations (Innes 2015; Cabot 2016). Describing her work, Innes (2015, 40) rejects the idea that she “gives voice,” and instead emphasizes a more humble position of the ethnographer. She argues that the method provides “a context in which security studies can open and listen to what is being said” (Innes 2015, 40). In other words, the voices of marginalized actors are already raised and the ear and eye of researchers must be trained to receive them. This relationship to participants and knowledge production allows Innes and other ethnographers to learn with and from marginalized peoples, as opposed to about them (see also Brigden, forthcoming).

Subversive Knowledge

Finally, and fitting with our call for disruptive scholarship, ethnographers position their work as potentially generative of *subversive* knowledge. This knowledge unveils the hidden agendas and assumptions embedded in scholarship and generates the potential for political change. Both Forrest (2017) and Vradi (2008) argue that this critical approach to knowledge production is *the* central contribution of ethnographic work. As explained by Timothy Pachirat (cited in Wedeen 2010, 256): “Ethnography as a method is particularly unruly, particularly undisciplined, particularly celebratory of improvisation, bricolage, and serendipity, and particularly attuned to the possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion in ways that other methods simply are not.” With these possibilities of surprise, inversion, and subversion, recent ethnographic work disrupts conceptual categories and political debates without devolving into either a post-truth apathy or an adherence to a dogmatic truth.

For example, building on feminist methodologies and critical security studies, Alexandria Innes (2015) uses ethnography to engage asylum seekers, thereby disrupting accepted notions of “security” and challenging the centrality of the state in IR discourse. In this instance, a reflexive encounter between the researcher and the lived experiences and daily practices of a marginalized population generates disruptive knowledge. Narratives and actions of asylum seekers constitute an alternative conceptualization of performative security. Innes arrives at this insight by translating their experiences into a language recognizable by IR scholars.

Our own work similarly attempts to disrupt. For example, Mainwaring (2019) brings migrants to the center of her analysis in order to examine their journeys to and within Europe and their experiences crossing the Mediterranean Sea in particular. The analysis reveals how, rather than the victims and villains they are often portrayed to be, they employ agency to exploit narrow margins of possibility and overcome significant barriers to mobility. In this way, Mainwaring unsettles traditional notions of the border and of “Europe.” Brigden (2018) traces the social practices that constitute Central American migration routes across Mexico and the uncertainty of the journey through that corridor. In doing so, she hopes to destabilize a series of racial, gender, and citizenship binaries that structure our understanding of international borders. By troubling these social categories, the lived experience

of the journey reveals the tenuous relationship between territory and the nation-state. Taken together, our work steadfastly refuses to engage in prediction about the future of the nation-state and instead highlights taken-for-granted ambiguities and overlooked tragedies caused by border controls. Nor do we hide our desire to impact the politics that we study by confounding easy oversimplifications that dominate public, policy, and academic discourse.

In these examples, ethnography embraces the messy manner in which methods interpret social and political worlds, necessarily excluding and including in the process. In this way, methods are understood as performative, enacting social and political worlds (Aradau and Huysmans 2014). They “have effects; they make differences; they enact realities; and they can help to bring into being what they also discover” (Law and Urry 2004, 393). Ethnography’s rejection of a singular Truth, in part a product of its embodied methods and the leveraging of insider/outsider dialogue, makes it particularly sensitive to how worlds and identities, things that are continuously changing, are (re)made and disrupted through research.

Inseparable Knowledges

These three knowledge categories—tacit, marginalized, and subversive—are not mutually exclusive. Marginalized or tacit knowledge can be subversive (Forrest 2017), but not necessarily. While the pursuit of marginalized knowledge often leads to subversive knowledge, we conceptualize the two projects as often complimentary but distinct. While it might be necessary, diversifying the knowledge available to researchers is not sufficient to destabilize common-sense understandings of the world. Marginalized knowledge, such as data retrieved from previously silenced or ignored populations, may reinforce or confirm what we thought we knew, rather than challenge our assumptions. Even if marginalized knowledge disrupts status quo assumptions, it may still become a tool to reinforce political repression, rather than subvert it. Whether revealed during the conduct of ethnography or big data methods, increasing the visibility of marginalized knowledge in a violent or hostile political context can be dangerous to vulnerable populations (Brigden and Gohdes 2020). A critical sensibility and awareness are necessary but not sufficient conditions for transforming marginalized knowledge into subversive knowledge.

All good scholarship is subversive of conventional understandings of the world. For critical scholars, the capacity to produce disruptive knowledge that also has a political impact in the world is the definition of good scholarship, not just good ethnography. Indeed, Forrest (2017) argues that one of the key means through which ethnography achieves its disruptive power is via the juxtaposition of marginalized knowledge against the commonly accepted concepts that underpin political and academic debate.

Ethnography and IR: Challenges and Limitations

Ethnography comes with its own set of challenges and ethical questions that have been discussed extensively in anthropology and other disciplines. These challenges are not only a problem for ethnographers but for all political scientists. The embodied practice of ethnography may actually produce a more acute awareness of such ethical questions (Schatz 2017, 137; Brigden and Gohdes 2020). Nevertheless, if adopted more broadly within the IR discipline, the embodied nature of the method also raises specific concerns. Here we focus on three interconnected issues that are particularly challenging when studying international politics ethnographically: access, the co-optation of vulnerable voices, and complicity. Although many of the examples in this section draw from studies on migration, our own field of expertise, we identify these challenges as acute and relevant to the study of international politics more generally, including important sites of inquiry in the

discipline, such as the state, security studies, diplomacy, and international political economy. Our new Covid-19 reality compounds our deep concern with these challenges, demonstrating exactly how dangerous ethnography can be, if done carelessly.

The study of traditional fields of inquiry in IR brings specific restrictions to access. Conducting participant observation while studying the state, security, and international organizations may be compromised by political and bureaucratic barriers to information and field sites. Secrecy often poses difficulties for moving beyond the analysis of official discourse.⁷ However, such barriers are not insurmountable. For example, some IR scholars take an autoethnographic approach, using their own previous employment experiences in government, international organizations, or the military as the basis of their research (e.g., Neumann 2005; Stepputat 2012; Brigden and Vogt 2014). Other ethnographic scholars “study up” and examine how the state, borders, and sovereignty are remade and resisted far from centers of power and state bureaucracies (e.g., Innes 2015; Brigden 2016; Mainwaring 2016).

In this regard, the access strategies of IR scholars might also be helpful for other ethnographers to consider in a world of Covid-19 quarantine restrictions and border closures. Across disciplines and topics, ethnographers today face similar access restrictions. In the field of anthropology, ethnographers have called for “patchwork ethnography” to grapple with recent mobility restrictions and health concerns (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). This approach reorients ethnography to a reality in which home/field boundaries become ambiguous, because the demands of everyday life on scholars limit fieldwork. For feminists, the new impediments to fieldwork that Covid-19 poses for ethnographers point to long-standing contradictions within academia (Blum 2020; Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020). These contradictions include colonial imaginaries of an exoticized distant field site, masculinist traditions that enabled heroic researchers time uninterrupted by personal commitments, and a disregard for the potential of ethnographers to themselves become “vectors of danger” for research participants at field sites (Blum 2020; Fine and Abramson 2020). In that sense, the challenges posed by quarantines and border closures merely exacerbate preexisting problems of access and ethics. In particular, these problems are familiar to scholars wishing to conduct fieldwork in areas of international security concern. Therefore, a conversation between IR ethnographers and other disciplines may prove enlightening in the current political moment, not only for IR but for other disciplines.

For example, drawing on her work on US immigration enforcement policies, political geographer Nancy Hiemstra (2017) argues that barriers to studying the state, power, policies, and institutions may be overcome through the feminist method and metaphor of the “periscope.” Building on ethnography and embodiment,

[a] periscopic strategy facilitates the researcher in identifying leaks in spaces that might at first glance appear contained and then pairing the reflections and refractions of those leaks with other sources of data to construct a coherent, if always incomplete, image of the cloistered space.

It may not be necessary (or ethical) to enter immigration detention centers or foreign ministries to study them ethnographically (e.g., Mountz 2011; cf. Mainwaring 2019, 172–73). Ethnographic work involves meandering paths to obtain data in creative ways over longer periods of time than traditionally allotted for data collection in IR research. These meandering paths often recombine multiple vantage points from archives, discourse, and experience (as integrated rather than bounded realms) to reimagine an intimate reality “at a distance” (Blum 2020). Furthermore, adopting a “periscopic strategy” may also avoid academic voyeurism, where access

⁷Lie (2013) argues that this has made anthropologists reluctant to study the state.

to dangerous, securitized, or unknown spaces is motivated more by anticipated esteem and admiration from the academic community, rather than the new truths that might be discovered (De Leon 2015, 11–16; Hiemstra 2017). Indeed, academic careers have been too often built on the exploitation of “exotic” and marginalized people and spaces. With or without Covid-19 as a risk factor, ethnographers in the field of IR must carefully consider when direct access to vulnerable populations is necessary. They must draw on a periscopic strategy to see “around” and “through” the gaps of secrecy.

The call for ethnography in IR and other disciplines is often made with the explicit aim of increasing the plurality of voices in scholarship. As a discipline, IR is particularly susceptible to disregarding the voices and practices of “ordinary” people—refugees, women, the poor, and people from the Global South—while privileging the voices and truth claims of the powerful—politicians, global elites, and bureaucrats. This bias against the ordinary is apparent even in the study of conflict, where IR scholarship has privileged interviews and data procured from military officials while overlooking the embodied experience of war as a potential source of insight (Sylvester 2012). While we believe that broadening IR’s horizons through ethnography and the incorporation of a multitude of voices would enrich the discipline, we also proceed with a word of caution. Promises of “giving voice” and empowerment through ethnographic work can overlook power relationships between researcher and research subject, as well as the broader context in which data are gathered. Despite genuine attempts at self-critique on the part of researchers,

[t]he production of disciplinary knowledge is shaped by the context of imperial legacies; ongoing settler colonial relationships; unequal class, race, and gender divisions; and an increasingly corporatized university culture, relationships that have everything to do with voice in research projects. (Coddington 2017, 316)

Drawing on her work with refugees and refugee advocates in Greece, Heath Cabot (2016, 650) eloquently demonstrates how “ethnographers remain imbricated in the dominant knowledge forms we seek to contest; and like advocates, we may also participate in silencing the very marginalized voices that we hope to hear or represent.” Cabot argues that ethnographers and advocates may exploit disembodied refugee voices and “eyewitness accounts” to create tragic tropes to garner attention. Such tropes are simplistic traces of the more complex and messy realities lived by refugees. Although we may never fully escape our complicity within these power structures and with the violence they inflict, Cabot urges scholars and advocates to lessen the harm done through cultivating humility in research approaches and responses to moments of epistemic anxiety and not knowing. For this reason, we distinguish conceptually between marginalized knowledge and subversive knowledge, despite the fact that the two knowledges are often inseparable in practice, and especially inseparable when ethnographic work relies on a reflexive ethics that privileges listening and allows for challenges to preconceived research ideas.

Related to questions of voice, power, and humility, and central to the ethnographic challenge, is striking a balance between being an insider and an outsider, between immersing oneself in a community and retaining an academic distance to it. In her work on nuclear strategists in the 1980s, Cohn (1987, 707–9) describes how learning “nukespeak,” with its reassuring distancing and abstraction from the horrors of nuclear war, allowed her to become part of the community, yet made it impossible to express her own ideas and values. Moreover, speaking the language of “defense intellectuals” changed the way she thought about nuclear war:

... no matter how prepared I was, no matter how firm my commitment to staying aware of the reality behind the words, over and over I

found that I could not stay connected, could not keep human lives as my reference point. I found I could go for days speaking about nuclear weapons without once thinking about the people who would be incinerated by them.

Ambiguity in the relationship between insider and outsider is inevitable in ethnographic work, because we inhabit multiple intersections of identities that complicate the boundaries of community and personal/research divides. However, given the unequal power dynamics that nevertheless structure distinctions between insiders and outsiders in fieldwork settings, the potential for unintended complicity with imperialist or colonial state projects is omnipresent. As a discipline, anthropology has a sordid history of such complicity (Gough 1968). More recently, the US military employed anthropologists and other social scientists in its Human Terrain System project to gain an understanding of the local populations in regions where it was deployed. The program ran between 2007 and 2014 and garnered much criticism for implicating anthropologists in a violent neocolonial project. The American Anthropological Association condemned the project as an “unacceptable application of anthropological expertise” that conflicted with the AAA’s Code of Ethics (AAA Executive Board 2007).

Applying ethnographic methods to IR involves studying power and the state in close proximity. We thus conclude with a word of caution to scholars to take a reflexive approach to resist the temptations of power and to avoid, where possible, complicity with the powerful. To guard against such temptations, ethnographers in IR should self-consciously prioritize *subversive* knowledge, rather than tacit or marginalized knowledge alone.

Conclusions

The present historical moment—a world reeling from a global pandemic, rife with far-right populism, and subject to a pendulum swinging rapidly against great power projects of liberal economic interdependence—recalls the global interwar period of the twentieth century. With the polarization of societies in the United States, UK, and elsewhere, it is an opportune moment for IR scholars to re-examine their methods and their role in the public debate. Indeed, at no time in recent memory, except perhaps in the interwar period, has intellectual humility been more important than the present (Resnick 2019).⁸

With their focus on tacit, marginalized, and subversive knowledge, ethnographic methods hold the promise of generating creative and transformative scholarship. As an inductive, improvised analysis and juxtaposition of multiple worldviews, ethnography is a critical academic enterprise. As such, it tackles taken-for-granted notions in political discourse and analysis (Pachirat 2009; Forrest 2017). This embodied method offers a potential antidote to disciplinary hubris in the field of IR (Brigden 2016), as well as a unique contribution to the contemporary political moment.

Relatedly, ethnography promises to collapse the prevalent dichotomy that persists in IR scholarship between the global and the local (cf. Johnson 2016). IR scholarship not only tends to privilege the truth claims of the powerful, but also maintains a scalar emphasis on what it considers “global.” However, as Burawoy (2001, 150) reminds us, “What we understand to be ‘global’ is itself constituted within the local; it emanates from very specific agencies, institutions and organizations whose processes can be observed first-hand.” The ethnographic linking and rethinking of the relationship between local and global through multiple knowledges offer a sense-making project to combat political tribalism and populism.

⁸In his broad public call for intellectual humility and citing President Trump’s self-evaluations of his own mental competence, Resnick (2019) points out that current political leadership lacks this quality to the point of extreme intellectual arrogance.

In summary, subversive knowledge is a transformative enterprise. In this vein, ethnography aims to destabilize prevalent notions of the world without necessarily replacing them with new foundations or practical prescriptions. Some mainstream IR scholars promote “policy relevance” by urging the discipline to find solutions to pressing political problems (Kristof 2014). Ethnographers do not axiomatically aim to produce knowledge as an instrument or tool for policymakers. Instead, by problematizing assumptions and understandings taken as unproblematic, ethnographic work can transform our understanding of policy and the possibilities of the state. With their limited time horizons, and political and bureaucratic incentives, policymakers may not realize the real-world implications of subversive knowledge or reward such destabilizing re-imaginings. The politics of knowledge production make the potentially subversive role of ethnographers in the IR discipline all the more important. The academic discipline of IR should embrace ethnography, rewarding the potential to reimagine our political moment and trespass across disciplinary (and state) boundaries.

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