

Political Ethnography
The New School for Social Research, GPOL 6196
Spring 2009

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After a seven days' march through the woodland, the traveler directed toward Baucis cannot see the city and yet he has arrived. The slender stilts that rise from the ground at a great distance from one another and are lost above the clouds support the city. You climb them with ladders. On the ground the inhabitants rarely show themselves: having already everything they need up there, they prefer not to come down. Nothing of the city touches the earth except those long flamingo legs on which it rests and, when the days are sunny, a pierced, angular shadow that falls on the foliage. There are three hypotheses about the residents of Baucis: that they hate the earth; that they respect it so much they avoid all contact; that they love it as it was before they existed and with spyglasses and telescopes aimed downward they never tire of examining it, leaf by leaf, stone by stone, ant by ant, contemplating with fascination their own absence.

-- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities**

Description

What does it mean to study politics from below? How does immersion of the researcher in the research world contribute to the study of power? What are the promises, and perils, of social research that invites the unruly minutiae of lived experience to converse with, and contest, abstract disciplinary theories and categories? In this practice-intensive seminar, we explore ethnographic and other qualitative fieldwork methods with specific attention to their potential to subvert, generate, and extend understandings of politics and power. Readings draw on exemplary political ethnographies as well as discussions of methodology and method in political science, sociology, and anthropology. Participants will have the opportunity to craft and conduct New York City based ethnographic research projects related to their primary areas of interest and will be expected to make significant weekly commitments to field research. The seminar is intended as preparation for students planning to conduct independent fieldwork for their MA or PhD research, but those interested in the epistemological, political and ethical implications of studying power from below are also welcome. This course fulfills the MA qualitative methods requirement.

**Background image adapted from Sybarite's modular prefabricated treehouse. "Imagined to allow flexible floorplans and to encourage a more organic approach to country living, the Treehouse is a modular system which capitalises on the beauty of its setting whilst minimising its impact upon it. The layout, along with panoramic windows, maximise benefit of the sun path, orientated so the kitchen enjoys morning light whilst the living and bedroom spaces have the pleasure of the sunset and twilight. The flexible form, comprised of modular prefabricated sections, enables configurations ranging from one to five bedrooms. As illustrated, the Treehouse would provide 300m² of internal floor space along with 200m² of roof terrace and could be installed on site in approximately two weeks. The extremely low-maintenance concept incorporates many features which reduce its environmental impact and maximise its self-sustainability. The piled foundations supporting the tripod legs are specifically designed to avoid tree root damage and ground surface impact. Rainwater is collected around the perimeter at roof level and is filtered and stored in a large tank located within the central core, providing enough water for toilet flushing, laundry and bathing. Solar cells are built into the roof perimeter and the 'belly' contains undulating kinetic baffles that capture wind power to generate electricity. Combined with top quality insulating techniques, natural cross-ventilation enhanced by the baffles and 'smart' triple glazing, the Treehouse is designed to be 70% energy self-sufficient. Roll out cost (50+ houses): £0.5million each" (<http://www.sybarite-uk.com/009.htm>, accessed 11/11/2008).*

Requirements

1. **Seminar Participation** (15%): Your preparation, presence, and participation are crucial. Please complete the required readings, be on time for each class, bring all relevant texts, and contribute energetically to the discussions. Unexcused absences, arriving late for seminars, or demonstrating an obvious lack of preparation for class will count heavily against you. You are responsible for all electronic communication through the seminar website and listserv.
 2. **Discussion Leading** (15%): You will lead one seminar during the semester. Responsibilities of the discussion leader(s) include briefly summarizing the key points of the readings, formulating provocative and engaging questions to encourage critical discussion, and writing a one page narrative summary of the discussion to be e-mailed to the list-serve before the start of the next class. Discussion leaders may use the departmental copier to make copies of any handouts for class.
2. **Field Assignments** (35%):
- a) Initial project description, due February 10: A one page description of the research project, including a clear statement of the research question, an initial choice of field site(s), a description of relevant field research to be conducted, and a statement of what you expect to find.
 - b) IRB proposal, due February 17: Follow The New School Institutional Review Board process for research involving human subjects, details to be discussed in class.
 - c) Field notes: Submitted weekly to your fieldwork support triad (to be determined in the second week of class), and to me on the last class of each calendar month. Field notes should be typed (even if initially jotted down by hand in a field notebook during observation), and should clearly distinguish between observation, interpretation and analysis (both theoretical and methodological), and self-reflexivity. Your monthly submission of field notes should also include a separate section recording all incoming and outgoing correspondence with your fieldwork support triad.
 - d) Interview transcripts: In the course of your fieldwork, conduct at least one informal interview and submit hand-written jottings that were kept during the interview and an approximate transcript recreated immediately after the interview from the jottings and from memory. Conduct as well at least one formal, taped interview and submit a full transcript. Observational, interpretive/analytic, and self-reflexive fieldnotes should also be submitted with the transcripts.
 - e) Fieldwork support triad: you will join a 3 person group that will provide support, feedback, and constructive criticism for your fieldwork throughout the semester. As noted above, you will submit your weekly fieldnotes to this group, and you will be expected to offer substantive support, feedback, and constructive criticism to the other two members of your group. The last half to third of each class period will be set aside for triad meetings, and you will be evaluated on the quality of your exchanges in these meetings.

4. **Final Paper** (35%): The seminar's culminating project is a 15 - 20 page double spaced paper in which you will bring both *the process* and the *preliminary results* of your fieldwork into critical discussion with the varieties of ethnographic approaches we have examined throughout the semester. Your paper should include a separate section on how you might further develop the fieldwork research and how, once completed, you plan to turn your project into an "ethnography," i.e., the form the final written product will take (including explicit attention to the logic of inquiry and explanation—e.g., positivist vs. interpretive—it will subscribe to). This section should include a description of what work you hope such a final written product will perform in academia and in the world, as well as a clear plan for how you will share (and possibly alter) the results of your ethnography with your fieldwork participants. The final paper should be submitted as a bound book which includes (as appendices) your research proposal, your complete fieldnotes and interview transcripts, and a record of all exchanges with your fieldwork support triad. There will be no extensions or incompletes granted in this course.
5. **Plagiarism** of any assignment in this course will result in a failing grade and referral to the NSSR Dean's Office. The New School University Writing Center has prepared a useful handout on plagiarism, available at www.newschool.edu/admin/writingcenter/documents/AvoidPlagiarism.pdf .
6. **There are no exams.**

Texts

Please obtain the following books (the first two have been added since the preliminary syllabus was sent out):

Katherine Kramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life* (U Chicago, 2004)

Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Vintage, 1995)

Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton U, 1993)

Piers Vitebsky, *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (Yale U, 1985)

Jessica Allina-Pisano, *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth* (U Cambridge, 2008)

Martha Huggins, *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (U California, 2002)

Joe Soss, *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System* (U Michigan, 2002)

Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (U Chicago, 1995)

Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, 30th Anniversary Edition with afterword by Pierre Bourdieu (U California, 2007 [1977])

Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, *Interpretation and Method: Empirical*

All other readings (marked **) will be made available for download under the "Files" section of the class website.

Schedule

Week 1: Tuesday, January 27

No class, but let's consider a few likely-to-be-asked questions about the schedule that follows.

Q1: Why so many books?

Indeed, there are many books. Eleven, to be precise. Here's why: The format for this seminar is intentionally modeled on the idea that ethnography is a craft, an art, and a sensibility and that as such it is best learned by **watching** (reading) and **imitating** (doing) rather than by following a prescribed set of inflexible steps and procedures. As such, with the exception of week 2, which offers a rough sketch of the contemporary ethnographic terrain in political science, anthropology, and sociology, we dedicate the bulk of our seminar to reading ethnographies **in their entirety** and learning what we can from watching the masters perform their art. Just as a student of painting spends many hours at MOMA imitating the masters before developing her own artistic vision, I strongly encourage you to work backwards from the finished pieces of ethnography we will be reading and attempt to appropriate --imitatively--the kinds of questions and sensibilities you perceive in their work. This is probably as good a time as any to add that we will be thinking about ethnography in at least 3 senses throughout this course: 1) ethnography as a mode of data access (also known as participant-observation fieldwork), 2) ethnography as a mode of data analysis, and 3) ethnography as a finished product. The texts we will be reading, of course, represent ethnography in its third mode, but we will also push ourselves to work backwards from the finished text to the techniques of data access and analysis that the authors used. See, once again, the painting metaphor.

Q2: But the books are so long!

Indeed, why not just read for the "bottom line argument" in each of these texts? Why must we read two, three, and even four hundred pages of "thick description?" The answer lies in the tri-modal nature of ethnography and ethnographic authority more generally. As a mode of analysis, ethnography eschews a simple "bottom line;" its goal is often to complexify rather than simplify the social world, and a key measure of its persuasiveness lies in its descriptive power, or verisimilitude (something you will be expected to develop in your own field notes). So, please read the books in their entirety, as complete texts, and suspend the rush to find a simple "bottom line."

Q3: How can I possibly complete all the readings, lead discussion, conduct field work, and comment on the field notes of my field work support triad?

We will work very hard this semester. But it will be worth it. I guarantee that by the end of the semester you will either love or hate ethnography, and you will know--definitively--whether/how you will want to use it in your own research.

Week 2: Tuesday, February 3 Ethnographic Authority and Discipline(s)

reflect: What is ethnography? What is the basis of ethnographic authority in

anthropology, political science, and sociology? What are the major fault lines that characterize ethnographic authority, both within and across disciplines, and to what extent do they reflect and/or drive deeper ontological and epistemological presuppositions?

general:

Amanda Coffey, "Editorial Introduction to the Handbook of Ethnography" [7 pages]**

Paul Rock, "Symbolic Interactionism and Ethnography" see especially "A Natural History of Ethnography" and the sections that follow [11 pages]**

James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority" [33 pages]**

anthropology:

Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" [25 pages]**

George Marcus, "Sticking with Ethnography through Thick and Thin" [21 pages]**

political science:

Lorraine Bayard de Volo and Ed Schatz, "From the Inside Out: Ethnographic Methods in Political Research" [6 pages]**

David Laitin, "The Perestroika Challenge to Social Science" [20 pages]**

Dvora Yanow, "Thinking Interpretively: Philosophical Presuppositions and the Human Sciences" in *Interpretation and Method* [17 pages]

sociology:

Michael Burawoy, "The Extended Case Method" [30 pages] **

Week 3: Tuesday, February 10, Fieldwork and the Production of Knowledge

reflect: Samer Shehata writes, "All researchers are implicated in the knowledge they produce. In ethnography, however, this becomes particularly difficult to disguise, in light of the central role of the ethnographic self in the production of claims to knowledge" (261). Discuss with special attention to Rabinow's book and to your research proposal. Synthesize with Michael Burawoy's arguments about "power effects" (silencing, domination, etc.) in his "Extended Case Study" article from last week.

Samer Shehata, "Ethnography, Identity, and the Production of Knowledge," in *Interpretation and Method* [17 pages]

Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, including "Preface to the 30th Anniversary Edition," "Foreword by Robert Bellah," and "Afterword by Pierre Bourdieu" [180 pages]

Initial project descriptions due at start of class (see requirements section of the syllabus for details).

Guest lecture on the IRB process: Cristina Dragomir, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Politics, The New School University

Week 4: Tuesday, February 17, The Reindeer People: A Case of What?

Claim: Pier Vitebsky's work makes a substantial contribution to our knowledge about politics and power. Argue for or against this claim, articulating clearly whether you are applying an interpretive vs. positivist research orientation (see Laitin vs. Yanow/Flyvbjerg from week two). In your argument, be sure to discuss Vitebsky's list of "Dramatis Personae," on pages xiii-xv. Can a work of political science, for example, legitimately include the following as characters: "spirits of rivers and fires," "wolves," "bears," and "a one eyed dog who can see into the future?"

Pier Vitebsky, *The Reindeer People*, entire [464 pages].

Emerson and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, preface and one [33 pages]

Completed IRB applications due at start of class.

Week 5: Tuesday, February 24, Weapons of the Weak: Theorizing Ethnography or Ethnographizing Theory?

Revisit Michael Burawoy's article on "The Extended Case Method" from week 2. How does Scott self-consciously try to relate theory and ethnography, and what is the balance between the two? Is Scott theorizing ethnography, ethnographizing theory, or is this a false distinction? Is Scott's work best understood within an interpretivist or positivist framework? Why?

James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, entire [375 pages]

Munck and Snyder, "Interview with James C. Scott" in *Passion, Craft, and Method in Comparative Politics* [40 pages]. **

Emerson and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, two and three [44 pages].

First set of typed field notes due at start of class (submitted to triad and to professor).

Week 6: Tuesday, March 3, In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Ethnography and Truth, One.

Schatz and Bayard de Volo argue in their article from week 2 that in its worst forms, ethnography in anthropology has descended into a mere navel-gazing exercise that makes it irrelevant for political science (and, indeed, makes it that much harder to establish ethnographic authority within political science). Defend Tsing's book against this charge, showing how it is relevant to extending our understandings of politics and power. Alternatively, substantiate this charge using Tsing's book as evidence. In your discussion, give special attention to the relationship between ethnography and truth in Tsing's text.

Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, entire [350 pages]

Emerson and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, four [30 pages]

Week 7: Tuesday, March 10, The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Ethnography and Truth, Two.

Allina-Pisano employs ethnography within a self-described soft-positivist framework. Compare her approach to the relationship between ethnography and truth with Tsing's. Does Allina-Pisano come closer to approximating the standards for "socially valid knowledge" outlined by David Laitin in his article from week 2? Why or why not?

Jessica Allina-Pisano, *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village*, entire [215 pages]

Jessica Allina-Pisano, "How to Tell and Axe Murderer: An Essay on Ethnography, Truth, and Lies" [19 pages]

Emerson and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, five and six [60 pages]

Tuesday, March 17 ENJOY SPRING BREAK

Week 8: Tuesday, March 24, The Architecture of Ethnography: A Semiotics of Space
Provide a careful spatial description and analysis of your fieldsite. What would a semiotics of space at your field site look like? In what ways do you "bound" your fieldsite, and what would it mean to expand its boundaries further?

Dvora Yanow, "How Built Spaces Mean: A Semiotics of Space" in *Interpretation and Method* [20 pages]

Neal Leach, "Sigfried Kracauer" in *Rethinking Architecture* [10 pages] **

Siegfried Kracauer, "The Hotel Lobby" and "On Employment Agencies: The Construction of a Space" [11 pages] **

Emerson and Shaw, *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, seven and eight [48 pages]

Week 9: Tuesday, March 31, Ethnography and/of the Five Senses
Provide a careful description and analysis of your field site utilizing each of your five senses. Review your past fieldnotes: are there certain senses that you tend to rely on regularly to the exclusion of others? What, if anything, might you have discovered had you focused on your other senses?

Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, entire [333 pages]

Ellen Pader, "Seeing with an Ethnographic Sensibility," in *Interpretation and Method*, [15 pages]

Week 10: Tuesday, April 7, Violence Workers: The Political Economy of Interviewing
In what ways are all interviews an exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee? What are the ethics of participant-observation in contexts where the researcher becomes complicit in knowledge of atrocity? What is the relationship between interview data and theory in Huggins' book?

Martha Huggins, *Violence Workers*, entire [293 pages]

Week 11: Tuesday, April 14, Talking about Politics: Real People Talking in their Own Terms on their Own Turf
Conduct a formal or informal interview and prepare it in dialogue with Walsh's study of informal groups and social identity in American political life.

Kathy Kramer Walsh, *Talking about Politics*, entire [282 pages]

Frederic Schaffer, "Ordinary Language Interviewing," in *Interpretation and Method* [11 pages]

First interview due

Week 12: Tuesday, April 21, Talking our Way to Meaningful Explanations: Justifying

Research Strategies

"The chapter that follows," Soss writes in his IM chapter, "is a reconstruction of what I did when I researched my 2000 book, Unwanted Claims. I suspect it's not what I would have told you if you'd asked me to describe my methodology at the time." Discuss this statement with reference to Soss' methodological chapter in Unwanted Claims and his later IM chapter. What are the burdens of ethnographic authority in political science? How are research practices legitimated post hoc?

Joe Soss, *Unwanted Claims*, entire [247 pages]

Joe Soss, "Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations" in *Interpretation and Method* [23 pages]

Week 13: Tuesday, April 28, Group Comments on Fieldnotes (7 students)

Week 14: Tuesday, May 5, Group Comments on Fieldnotes (7 students)

Final interview due (whichever, formal or informal, you did not submit in week 12)

Week 15: Tuesday, May 12, Group Comments on Fieldnotes (7 students)

**Final Papers due on Monday, May 18 at 4 p.m. via hard copy and email.
No incompletes or extensions.**