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Forum: Critical Ethnography

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Introduction

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Approaching our research from a critical angle usually indicates that we care about the state of the world and bother about what is going on. And indeed, there is plenty to bother about in the (still) early 21st century. The effects of global warming are palpable all over the planet, and fossil fuel industries continue to thrive although they have been under constant and loud critique for decades. Many countries in the Global North are on the brink of fascism, despite committed and long-term anti-fascist and anti-racist struggles. Reproductive rights are being retracted despite three whole waves of feminism. Wealth is being increasingly privatized in the hands of a privileged few while the Global South continues to suffer the effects of (neo)colonialism and extractive capitalism, and European governments are – in an increasingly radical manner – criminalising migration and thus, exacerbating the enduring effects of imperial domination and exploitation. Now more than ever, we cannot lose sight of the potential paths to transformative and social justice. As Didier Fassin has put it, for many ethnographers it is "a dissatisfaction or even an indignation

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before a certain state of the world"[1] that intrinsically motivates their research and, in some cases, the activist work that goes beyond it.

Critical ethnography is a house at the intersection of various disciplines where those who feel dissatisfied and indignant about the current state of the world can find a temporary refuge or even a home. This makeshift building features many extensions and peculiar windows to look out of and is still taking shape on a foundation that is in constant need of repair. People in the house sit on uncomfortable chairs and keep arguing over which books to read, and discussing questions such as: who and what are we researching? How do we understand and represent the objects and intents of our research? Who are we writing for? How does one put criticism into practice? And even before entering the house, many stop to ask: doesn't the pairing of *critique* and *ethnography* somehow feel like an oxymoron?

Critique, in the broadest possible understanding, is a form of doubt about power. Ethnography, however, is not necessarily doubtful of power, but has been and can be involved and complicit in stabilising and legitimising hegemonic power relations. Ethnography was the heart and soul of the emerging academic discipline of anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century and the practice was deeply entangled and implicated in European colonialism and colonial administration. Many ethnographic representations of "natives" in the colonies served to construct a stereotypical "cultural other," which shaped orientalist and racist discourse and legitimised colonial oppression and exploitation.[2] And yet, a few early anthropologists challenged this *Zeitgeist* also. Franz Boas, for instance, was one of the early, outspoken opponents of scientific racism. His ethnographic work was driven by an understanding of the equal value of cultures across difference.

Ethnography, as we see it, is not a neutral, but political practice. Echoing the anthropology of colonialism, critical ethnographers must remain sceptical of power and consider who and what their ethnographic studies serve. In this endeavour, ethnographic practices and critical social theories have inspired each other for a long time. Feminist and postcolonial political theorists have long used ethnography as a vehicle for their thinking.[3] In turn, critical social theory was never simply an "armchair" exercise nor an anti-empirical endeavour.[4] Max Horkheimer argued in his 1937 essay *Traditional and Critical Theory* that (any form of) critique must be grounded in the analysis of social reality.[5] How we understand critique and how we use or embody critique in ethnographic practice has changed profoundly in the past decades with and through the advancement of different bodies of critical thought and practice – and it continues to change, with a lot of work already carved out and still ahead of us.[6]

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[1] Fassin, D. (2017). The Endurance of Critique. *Anthropological Theory*, *17*(1), p. 26; see also Kušić in this Forum.

[2] Asad, T. (Ed.). (1973). *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Humanities Press; Said, E. (1989). Representing the Colonised: Anthropology's Interlocutors. *Critical Inquiry, 15*: 205–225; Pels, P. (2008). What Has Anthropology Learned From the Anthropology of Colonialism? *Social Anthropology*, *16*(3): 280–299.

[3] Longo, M., and Zacka, B. (2019). Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key. *American Political Science Review*, *113*(4): 1066.

A multiplicity of theories, politics, and practices of critique including, but not limited to feminist and queer politics, Marxist approaches, critical theory, post- and decolonial practices, anti-racist politics, and indigenous ontologies have informed ethnography in distinct ways. Feminist politics, for instance, have shaped ethnographic practice into a mode of anti-oppression inquiry, made self-scrutiny a necessity, and suggested different ways of actualising ethical responsibility and care towards communities and sites of knowledge production.[7] Postcolonial and decolonizing bodies of critique have urged ethnographers to completely rethink the matters of ethics, reflexivity and positionality in research practice, and paved the way towards exploring collaborative research methods, and participatory action research. Other critical ethnographers have looked to critical theory and described ethnography as a method of *doing critical theory*,[8] aimed at deconstructing hegemony and challenging oppression as an act of "intellectual rebellion."[9]

The modalities of critique that can be embodied in ethnographic practice are manifold. Thus, the understandings of what critical ethnography is, and what makes critical ethnography critical, also vary widely. While some scholars boldly argue that ethnography is inherently critical,[10] others emphasize the need for a political objective to their research, most commonly defined as interrogating hegemonic systems of oppression and power asymmetries to foster social and transformational justice.[11] "We do not like it, and we want to change it," as Phil F. Carspecken has put it.[12] More specifically, D. Soyini Madison has argued that critical ethnography "begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain."[13] As the critical ethnographer has, according to her, the "moral obligation to make a contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity," it is then the task of the researcher to take "us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the *status quo*, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control."[14]

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[4] Poyares, M. (2021). Theory's Method? Ethnography and Critical Theory. In B. Bianchi, E. Filion-Donato, M. Miguel, and A. Yuva, eds. *Materialism and Politics*. ICI Berlin Press, p. 347; Biehl, J. (2013). Ethnography in the Way of Theory. *Cultural Anthropology*, *28*(4): 573–597.

[5] Poyares 2021, p. 347; see also Celikates, R. (2018). *Critique as Social Practice. Critical Theory and Social Self-understanding*. Rowman & Littlefield.

[6] Kaur, R., and Klinkert, V. L. (2021). Decolonizing Ethnographies. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, *11*(1): 246–255.

[7] E.g., Visweswaran, K. (1994). *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. University of Minnesota Press; McNamara, P. (2009). Feminist Ethnography: Storytelling that Makes a Difference. *Qualitative Social Work*, *8*(2): 161–177; Schrock, R. D. (2018). The Methodological Imperatives of Feminist Ethnography. *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, *5*: 54–60.

[8] Kincheloe, J.L. and McLaren, P. (2011). Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. In K. Hayes, S. R. Steinberg, and K. Tobin, eds. *Key Works in Critical Pedagogy*. Brill, pp. 285–326.

[9] Thomas, J. (1993). *Doing Critical Ethnography,* cited in Madison, D.S. (2012). *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Sage, p. 13.

Understanding the project of critical ethnography in this way, we want to recognize the potential that ethnographic research holds for critique, and how ethnography can lend itself to critical social theory in different ways. For one, Anne Norton has argued that the knowledge needed for change frequently comes from the periphery, and ethnographers have long recognized the "power of liminal, or marginal, groups."[15] Another important potential lies in the ethnographic sensibility for the mundane and the everyday where ethnographers can bring to light the normalized and naturalized instances of power relations.[16] In doing so, ethnography makes silenced voices heard and makes the concealed visible as "a strategy that seeks to invert the 'power through transparency' formula in the service of transformation rather than control and domination."[17] Thus, ethnography can have a subversive and emancipatory thrust but is equally suited, as Laura Nader prominently suggested, for "studying up" the appearances and workings of power, including "our own" academic structures of power.[18]

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[10] Fassin 2017, p. 26.

[11] E.g., Madison 2011.

[12] Carspecken, P.F. (1996). *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide*. Routledge.

[13] Madison 2011, p. 5.

[14] Madison 2011, p. 5.

[15] Norton, A. (2004). *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method*. Yale University Press, p. 41.

[16] E.g., Pachirat, T. (2009). The Political in Political Ethnography: Dispatches From the Kill Floor. In E. Schatz, ed. *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 143–62; Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Duke University Press.

[17] Pachirat, T. (2011). *Every Twelve Seconds. Industrializes Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. Yale University Press, p. 243.

As we see the ambiguity, diversity, and polysemy that critical ethnography produces as a strength, the forum does not attempt to define either of the terms – critique and ethnography – in its title. We do not believe in only one way of thinking and doing critical ethnography. Rather, the forum brings together a range of theoretical perspectives and modalities from different disciplines.

The first contribution by Katarina Kušić further elaborates the sentiment of indignation that motivates ethnographic research. In Kušić's view, the strength of critical ethnography stems, on the one hand, from its destabilizing force that "challenges the established limits of what matters in political life." On the other hand, ethnography has the critical potential to challenge all kinds of concepts established in our academic disciplines and institutions and that are still (re)producing power asymmetries. Kušić reminds us of an important question that should guide our research at any time: Who and what do our ethnographies serve?

Kristin Eggeling's contribution taps into another source of criticality that is inherent to ethnography, which many ethnographers have yet to fully exhaust. By focusing on ethnographic writing, Eggeling's text is both an encouragement to put ethnography's own modalities to the test, and a sharp critique of incomprehensible textual practices that dominate academic writing. Setting an extraordinary example, Eggeling shows what a different kind of writing might look like by presenting three metaphorical animals that invite us to theorize the relationship between ethnography, writing and critique.

In his contribution, André Weißenfels commits to a Marxist tradition of critique and argues that ethnography is particularly good at illuminating the entanglements of the economic base and superstructure in capitalist relations of production. During his research in a Tunisian factory, Weißenfels struggled with the observation that factory workers did not feel particularly exploited, but rather enjoyed working there. He argues that ethnography can lend itself to Marxist analysis and reveal the intimate workings of capitalism in the realm of desires, promises and aspirations for a good life. Driven by desires and optimistic attachments to a way of life that the development imaginary promises them, the workers put up with their working conditions without questioning the structural exploitation they endure.

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[18] Nader, L. (1972). Up the Anthropologist. Perspectives Gained From Studying Up In D. Hymes, ed. *Reinventing Anthropology*. Vintage Books; Baumann, J.N. (2023). Contesting Academic Cultures of Power Abuse. *Boasblog: Contested Knowledge*, July 11, online: https://boasblogs.org/contestedknowledge/contesting-academic-cultures-of-power-abuse/; De Lauri, A., Nader, L., Graeber, D., Price, D., and Wright, S. (2017). Academic Politics of Silencing. *Public Anthropologist Blog*, October 11, online: https://publicanthropologist.cmi.no/2017/10/11/academic-politics-of-silencing/.

Andreas Streinzer and Ryan Davey make the case for queer-Marxian approaches to critical ethnography. By tracing the genealogies of both Marxian and queer-feminist scholarship, their contribution develops the queer-Marxian approach as a particularly apt tool for scrutinising the role of sexuality and gender in the organisation of social reproduction, and to explore how different forms of living and loving are either oppressed or recognized in capitalist societies. Against that backdrop, the contribution presents immanent, abolitionist, and fugitive critique as three modalities these theoretical sensibilities can nurture.

Johanna Kocks and Felix Anderl's contribution argues that ethnography is a particularly congenial tool of critical theory as it can carve out the critical capacities of resistant subjects. They point out how the self-understanding and concept of social justice of quilombolan communities on the Brazilian Ilha de Maré serve as a source of resistance against extractive industries. Drawing on this example, they propose that ethnography can be used as a tool of immanent critique when the hopes, desires, and imaginaries of the oppressed inform its sense of direction.

In line with the assumption that ethnography derives critical impetus from research practice, Lena Merkle considers alternative approaches to fieldwork. The contribution sets off by demystifying traditional concepts of the field and ideals of fieldwork. Merkle weighs up the advantages and disadvantages and then makes the case that remote and hybrid approaches are valid and valuable modalities of doing fieldwork.

Julia Leser's contribution argues for weaponizing ethnography against power and oppression. Taking inspiration from the work of Laura Nader and Dorothy E. Smith, Leser proposes to use ethnography as a strategic practice of critique that aims to reveal and demystify the workings of power and hegemonic apparatuses. Leser uses two examples from her own research into the police and the far right to illustrate ethnography's potential to expose and challenge systems and structures of power.

In her conclusion to this forum, Anna Leander argues that the turn to ethnography in the International Social Sciences is doubly unsettling. Focusing specifically on the usage of definitions, she underscores both that International Social Sciences practices are turned upside-down as definitions become the result not the start of research and that ethnographic practices are reconfigured towards the critical.

This forum is intended to be a place where we can discuss our experiences with doing critical ethnography in our different fields, projects, and disciplines, and for putting the spotlight on ethnography's potential and usefulness for critique. Ethnographers are often acutely aware of the social conditions and power relations in the world they study and frequently struggle with political and ethical issues. Indeed, ethnographic research can have the potential to address forms of social injustice and inequalities and develop forms of grounded critique that aim to change these conditions and achieve greater equality. However, critique is a contested term and it is not a given that ethnography unfolds critical potential. Given this backdrop, the forum brings together contributions that explore different forms of critique that ethnography enables.

This forum is grounded in a workshop on *Critical Ethnography* that was organised by the German Political Science Association's working group on political ethnography. The workshop took place at Philipps University Marburg in November 2022, and we are grateful to all our participants' inputs and contributions to our discussions and the development of ideas, most of which found their way into this forum.

Who and What Does Critical Ethnography Serve?

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I have spent the majority of my post-graduate education learning about ethnography, trying and failing to practice it, and discussing it with peers, mentors, and students. Many of these discussions start with complaints: ethnography is often hard to "sell" to the discipline in which I am trained and employed (International Relations, IR); it is hard to practice; and it is often interpreted through the prism of professional, political, and personal failures. So why choose this contested methodology when we live in an age replete with restrictions on the practice of ethnography and have access to many alternatives?[19]

I want to consider two starting points to ethnography as a preferred methodology. Both of these depend on understanding it as an inherently critical practice, and both originate from different shades of indignation, understood as anger or annoyance at phenomena that we consider unfair or unjust. Indignation arises from a world full of violence and exploitation. Ethnography can help highlight this injustice and the struggles against it. Indignation is also a reaction to the abstracted version of the world produced by more "removed" methodologies. In this context, ethnography can help revive old concepts. In both cases, ethnography serves as a critical project: whether that involves remaining close to political practice or reflexively turning to the historicity and limitations of existing scholarship.

In this piece, I first discuss my understanding of ethnography, and then show how it is made to serve these different critical projects. I wish to highlight the importance of these starting points and the nuances in their paths. Those of us who use ethnographic methods can breathe new life into old concepts, but we must be wary of reifying them. Ethnography should not serve merely to add to existing conceptual worlds, but it can challenge and sometimes undo them. And while ethnography can indeed position us close to political allies, it can also do important work in slow and unexciting sites, where there is little contestation and power is so entrenched that it is barely noticeable.

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[19] I would like to thank the editors of the Forum, Jakub Záhora, and Felix Anderl for thoughtfully helping the development of this piece.

Defining Ethnography

Defining what ethnography is and does is a surprisingly controversial endeavour. Its arrival in IR was both belated and multiply contested. The disciplinary resistance to context-specific and interpretive research is common. But even those who adopt ethnography are often said to miss its "classical virtues"[20] or to start with entirely wrong expectations of ethnography and its functions.[21] My understanding of ethnography as a particular sensibility – something that has been referred to as a particular stance, imaginary, or orientation – has three main aspects that position it in the broader critical social sciences. First, by recognising that the main data collection tool is the researcher, with all the theories, concepts, situatedness, emotions, and affects that go along with it, ethnography abandons the "view from nowhere" and recognises that all knowledge is produced from a particular location.[22] In critical theory terms, it is aware of its own historicity. Second, ethnography is oriented towards the social world and material objects but pays special attention to the meaning-making work that goes into creating them. This allows us to appreciate not just human experiences better, but also how they are made through different underwriting forces. And third, my understanding of relations with interlocutors does not focus on intimacy or closeness celebrated in ethnographic accounts, but on what Tim Ingold referred to as *correspondence:* "to join in correspondence with those with whom we learn or among whom we study, in a movement that goes forward rather than back in time." A stance that strives towards coevalness, but that is "neither given nor achieved but always in the making."[23]

I distinguish between anthropology as a discipline usually associated with ethnography, ethnography as a methodological orientation, and participant observation as one ethnographic tactic of inquiry.[24] Such a definition moves away from ethnography as a tactic of inquiry with standards that are never achieved – whether those are the expectations of a 12-month stay or complete immersion and participation. Nowadays, it is recognised that the grounding myths of anthropological fieldwork survive only as ideals: never accomplished but profoundly shaping knowledge production and researchers' subjectivities.[25] Most of our ethnographies are dispersed, multi-sited, and draw on a spate of methods such as ethnographic interviews, impromptu focus groups, and our own everyday observations. Gone are the distinctions between field and home, and the neoliberal academy rarely allows for the "purity" of dedicated long visits. While ethnography has always been messier than publicly acknowledged, these contingencies become obvious in an era of "patchwork ethnography."[26]

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[20] Philipsen, L. (2020). Improvising the International: Theorizing the Everyday of Intervention from the Field. *Cooperation and Conflict,* 55(2): 151–69.

[21] Vrasti, W. (2008). The Strange Case of Ethnography and International Relations. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies,* 37(2): 279–301.

[22] Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective, *Feminist Studies,* 14(3): 575–99; Harding, S. (1992). Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity?" *The Centennial Review,* 36(3): 437–70.

[23] Ingold, (2014). That's Enough about Ethnography! *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory,* 4(1): 389.

[24] Forsey, M.G. and Hockey, J. (2012). Ethnography Is Not Participant Observation: Reflections on the Interview as Participatory Qualitative Research. In J. Skinner, ed. *The Interview: An Ethnographic Approach*, Berg: 69–104.

Despite the changes in the practice of fieldwork and the structures in which it unfolds, the reasons for embarking on ethnographic projects seem durable. One important source of indignation for ethnographers is simply existing in the social, political, economic, and ecological worlds we inhabit. Many political ethnographies start from a general feeling of wanting to be on the "good side." We see the world burning and we want to help those carrying the water buckets, to at least show solidarity with those on the front lines, if not throw some water on the fire ourselves. At times, this means mixing activism and scholarship,[27] and at others carefully reflecting on the overlaps and tensions between the two.[28] Thus, ethnography is often discussed in relation to different forms of activism and the political power of "non-activist" research. Even for those of us who are not involved in political organising, a critical understanding of research as a political practice brings forth ethnography as a political entanglement. Ethnographic research can reveal the injustices of the world and highlight the manifold resistances that give hope for a more just tomorrow.

A different type of indignation is perhaps more specific to disciplines like IR, where ethnographic methodologies are more recent developments, and where they are often presented as correctives to the depoliticising narratives of the supposed disciplinary pasts.[29] Here, we are annoyed at the violence of abstraction. We resent reducing democracy or progress to numbers, a process common to both the discipline and the practice of global governance. For those interested in the richness of political life, indices, rankings, and typologies often act as tragic erasures rather than useful parsimonies. This annoyance also extends into conceptual debates and framings. Many ethnographic projects in IR start as a rebellion against speaking about state, government, gender, or international political economy in ways that do not feel real – ways that do not take into account the messiness of applying and resisting power. The critical contribution of ethnography here is a critique of ossified concepts and the rich and often magical material that allows insight into how governance happens and how the state is continuously reshaped in everyday encounters. Ethnographers often go further: they criticise scholars using the same metrics as decision makers as collusion, a process that reifies them instead of querying what these indices and numbers are concealing.[30]

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[25] Hanson, R. and Richards, P. (2019). *Harassed: Gender, Bodies, and Ethnographic Research*. University of California Press; Kušić, K. and Záhora, J. eds. (2020). *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations*. E-International Relations.

[26] Günel, G., Varma, S. and Watanabe, C. (2020). A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography, *Member Voices. Fieldsights* 9.

[27] Coleman, L.M. (2015). Ethnography, Commitment, and Critique: Departing from Activist Scholarship. *International Political Sociology,* 9(3): 263–80.

[28] Shepherd, L.J. (2018). Activism in/and the Academy: Reflections on "Social Engagement." *Journal of Narrative Politics,* 5(1): 45–56.

[29] Vrasti (2008).

My own turn to ethnography during my MA and PhD studies was a combination of both. I felt that the world had to be better and wanted to learn more about the different ways people imagined this improvement. Once my work was more firmly situated in statebuilding and peacebuilding interventions – vast projects that announce their benevolent aims loudly, I was beset by a feeling of misfit between writings about the post-war Balkans and my own understandings of that reality. While it is no surprise that I did not find numbers and indices familiar, I felt estranged from narratives that were constructed around neat typologies, be they "ethnic reconciliation," or "local resistance." Ethnography emerged as a possible path to that other reality, where war is less spectacular, interventions more banal, and futures more suspicious. In this reality, the "problems" of the Balkans were not simply problems of wars, but problems of political life in a peculiar space and time of international capitalism. These affective orientations that I trace to indignation should not be dismissed. They provide inspiration for designing and starting projects, and the endurance needed for fieldwork experienced on both personal and professional levels. But I also want to probe these affective orientations – not to prove them wrong, but to do what I think critical ethnography does best: identify and challenge the established limits of what matters in political life.

Adding Depth, Reifying Concepts

Ethnography in IR has helped illuminate things as varied as the lives of diplomats, spouses on military bases, and the inner workings of climate summits and the European Commission. In my own research, ethnography has been crucial for revealing the messy lives of international intervention, adding understandings of political lives of both interveners and those intervened upon, and critically appraising existing ideas on what intervention is and does.[31]

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[30] I thank Felix Anderl for helping me bring out this point.

But limiting ethnography to deepening existing research areas can blunt its critical edge. The "surprise" element of ethnography (and interpretive methods more broadly)[32] is celebrated as one of its key contributions across disciplines and topics. Ethnographic insights challenge "prior categories and assumptions, exposing uncharted territory where familiar categories don't hold."[33] Ethnographers depend on "unplanned moments" in the field that can become crucial data;[34] and they emphasise exposure and the possibility of surprise ahead of "procedure."[35] To do this, we often have to put aside the existing explanations of a phenomenon.[36] In the case of my project on state building and peacebuilding in the Balkans, that meant putting aside existing explanations of these processes as imperial plots, benevolent improvement, or messy embodiments of global neoliberalism. Instead, I was navigating a more open research practice. Staying reflexively attuned to the possibilities of this openness is crucial to ethnography as a critical practice.

In the interpretivist vocabulary, this openness depends on a difference between "casing a study" and "studying a case."[37] A realist approach to case selection implies finding a case that fits our conceptual class of interest – studying a well-defined case. I have often wondered whether the processes I study in the Balkans belong in the conceptual class of intervention. Is modernising agriculture in preparation for EU membership a case of intervention? While ethnographic methods can be used to add depth to a number of cases, this process can also reify concepts. This was often my feeling with the critical peacebuilding literature. As exciting fieldwork-based studies moved to everyday practices, art, social movements, and youth politics as sites of peacebuilding, I could not help but wonder about the effects of casing such a wide variety of political experiences as peacebuilding. How does this change the way we approach these subjects? Does it affect what we expect to learn? Could critical work further reify the same problematic concepts?

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[31] Kušić, K. (2023). Rethinking International Intervention through Coeval Engagement: Non-Formal Youth Education and the Politics of Improvement. *Review of International Studies*: 1–22.

[32] Kurowska, X. and Bliesemann de Guevara, B. (2020). Interpretive Approaches in Political Science and International Relations. In L. Curini and R. Franzese, eds. *The Sage Handbook of Research Methods in Political Science and International Relations*. SAGE, pp. 1221–1240.

[33] Murray Li, T. (2014). *Land's End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier*. Duke University Press, p. 5.

[34] Fujii, L.A. (2015). Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data. *Qualitative Research* 15(4): 525–39.

[35] Kurowska and Bliesemann de Guevara (2020).

[36] Wilkinson, C. (2015). Not Just Finding What You (Thought You) Were Looking for: Reflections on Fieldwork Data and Theory. In D. Yanow and P. Schwartz-Shea, eds. *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. Routledge, pp. 387–405.

[37] Soss, J. (2021). On Casing a Study versus Studying a Case. In E.S. Simmons and N. Rush-Smith, eds. *Rethinking Comparison: Innovative Methods for Qualitative Political Inquiry*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 84–106.

A nominalist approach, on the other hand, embraces the fact that our choices of a study location and context depend on a wider number of variables and the study "emerges" while we are casing a study. Instead of studying a case we had previously confirmed "belongs" to the conceptual class in which we are interestedd in, an unfolding study needs to be cased: finding interesting material, we wonder what is this a case of?[38]

In my work, critical ethnographic observations led me to question international intervention as a casing, and they allowed me to recognise it as a "gatekeeping concept"[39] that organises how International Relations understands the Balkans.[40] Importantly, this power-laden process has conceptual boundaries that determined who speaks and in what voice. My ethnographic work served as a critique of the conceptual confines of intervention as an organising concept of research practice. After spending some time researching agricultural governance in Serbia, I wondered whether the intersection of local and global land markets might be a more important story to tell. Could this be a case of contradictions constitutive to liberal improvement rather than something limited to spaces and cases of post-conflict reconstruction? Is the concept of intervention limiting my understanding of subjects of intervention? What can we learn when we transgress its conceptual limits? What kinds of solidarities can be forged?[41] Reflexive and interpretive ethnographic methodologies challenge established casings, and this is where their critical potential lies.

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[38] Soss (2021).

[39] Appadurai, A. (1986).Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 28(2): 356–74.

[40] Helms, E. (2013). *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 37–38.

[41] Kušić (2023).

Who Needs to See the Struggle

This is a time of an angering and painful realisation that social sciences have flourished in an entrenched parochialism thriving under the veneer of universality. What international political life is understood to be is limited to a tiny minority of experiences, far from any global inclusion. Moving into a methodology that allows extended engagement with those excluded is both understandable and commendable. Many ethnographies look explicitly to neglected majorities, those suffering exploitation and discrimination, to make them epistemically generative: to include their experiences not only as an ethical project, but to use them to rethink the theories and structures we use and observe.[42]

Ethnography can be instrumental in dismantling the claims of universalism, but it can also do harm in the process. Two possible counter-intuitive scenarios should be kept in mind. First, opening up any struggle to scrutiny may be counterproductive to the political commitments with which we had started. To put it bluntly, uncovering information of social movements might help those working against them; studying coping mechanisms after the withdrawal of the welfare state might normalise them as service providers in future austerity scenarios. While we move through our research practice with curiosity and political solidarity, we have almost no control over who or how uses the knowledge we produced.[43] By conducting research in the first place, we might be perpetuating colonial hierarchies and patterns of extraction and exploitation. As Hagen et. al. powerfully discuss in their take on refusal, researchers' reasonings for doing research to "give voice" or "provide a multiplicity of perspectives" are often "rhetorical devices" that "hide more prosaic reasons to pursue a certain research project, such as simply being interested in the topic, following a trend, or wanting to spend time in an 'exotic' location."[44] We are thus invited to contemplate refusal and consider not going "there" in the first place, with or without ethnographic or critical sensibilities.[45]

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[42] Go, J. (2016). *Postcolonial Thought and Social Theory*. Oxford University Press.; Sabaratnam, M. (2017). *Decolonising Intervention: International Statebuilding in Mozambique*. Rowman & Littlefield.

[43] I am immensely grateful to Fred Schaffer for a dedicated discussion of this topic during the 2022 Interpretive Methodologies Method School in Aarhus, Denmark.

[44] Hagen, J.J. et al. (2023), Learning to Say "No": Privilege, Entitlement and Refusal in Peace, (Post)Conflict and Security Research. *Critical Studies on Security*, p. 3.

[45] Guasco, A. (2022). On an Ethic of Not Going There. *The Geographical Journal,* 188(3): 468–475.

And secondly, focussing on the struggle may further normalise exploitation that unfolds without contestation. Rob Nixon's[46] concept of slow violence and Alexander Vorbrugg's work on dispersed dispossession[47] and ethnographies of slow violence[48] have helped me make sense of fieldwork in post-socialist, rural Yugoslavia where spectacular violence rarely occurrs and is seldom met with politically unified resistance. Critical ethnography shows its strength here by prying open the banal and exposing forms of oppression that have long since been normalised. It is a difficult task that takes us away from those with whom we want to nurture solidarities, but it is also a task that requires the situated nature of ethnography.

This brings in a different type of refusal: this is not just about "not going there" and avoiding once again taking the time of over-researched communities,[49] but also finding spaces where that fatigue is not present and power works more insidiously. In my case, this has meant leaving the field of international intervention. I moved from thinking critically about approaches, to critically situating research themes. Instead of condemning intervention for lack of attention to the socio-ecological lives it aims to improve, I now think about international ecological and political life from those sites. Perhaps this is my quiet refusal, and perhaps it keeps me away from doing more fieldwork. Regardless, it is a product of critical ethnography.

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[46] Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.

[47] Vorbrugg, A. (2019). Not About Land, Not Quite a Grab: Dispersed Dispossession in Rural Russia. *Antipode,* 51(3): 1011–1031.

[48] Vorbrugg, A. (2022). Ethnographies of Slow Violence: Epistemological Alliances in Fieldwork and Narrating Ruins. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space,* 40(2): 447–62.

[49] Lai, D. (2020). A Different Form of Intervention? Revisiting the Role of Researchers in Post-War Contexts. In B. Bliesemann de Guevara and M. Bøås, eds. *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention: A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts*, Bristol University Press, pp. 171–84.

Writing Critical Ethnography

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A lab rat, a wolfdog and a cuttlefish walk into an essay on critical ethnography. The lab rat is given a seat in the back, the wolfdog roams the room, and the cuttlefish sits awkwardly across two chairs. The lab rat is wearing a sign reading *Involuntarily here*, the wolfdog whistles *I am not really here*, and the cuttlefish stammers *I am indifferent to my presence in this intellectualist assemblage*. Of course, they are not *really* here. They are metaphors, fabulations, useful *fictions* of storytelling that live on these pages.[50] To replace them, I could speak of positionality and reflexivity for the lab rat, epistemic openness for the wolfdog and academic genre for the cuttlefish. But that would not drive the main point home, which is that one of the biggest problems of academic work today is its barricading behind -isms, -ities and life-robbing jargon. By writing in ways that no one can understand, the critical potential of much social science research is lost from the outset. Trying to challenge my own genre, this essay focuses on the textual dimension of ethnography and the critical potential that lies in writing "differently."

The following is a meditation on everyday academic practice and an invitation to snap out of unconsciously reproducing patterns of representation that may lead to success in the great academic world of wanting and achieving,[51] but that do not live up to the ethnographic ethos of wanting to make sense of the world beyond.

For this, why should we focus on writing? Ethnography, broadly understood, is at least three things: method, attitude, and text. As method, it is often equated with participant observation, an immersive strategy of generating data by living in, with, or among another "culture" ("ethno"). As attitude, ethnography describes a working sensibility often linked to curiosity, serendipity, and rapport. As text ("-graphy"), ethnography becomes a noun and we speak of "the

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[50] The creatures in this text are taken from other academic, political texts; for a recent and even more radical version of using fabulation in ethnographic writing, see for instance Monserrate, S.G. (2020) Silicon Fox. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 45(1): 130–138.

[51] This "great academic world" is a version of the capitalistic and competitive "great outside world" evoked by David Foster-Wallace, see Foster Wallace, D. (2005). *This is Water*, *Kenyon College Alumni Bulletin*. Available at: http://bulletin-archive.kenyon.edu/x4280.html.

Ethnography": a written account with certain characteristics, such as living dialogue or rich empirical detail.

What, then, is *critical* ethnography? In the social sciences, critique generally means one of two things. A form of judgement, often negative and damming, seeking to open a door for alternatives; or an exploration of how things came to be a certain way, often based on surprise, confusion, or disbelief. This mirrors the broad distinction in social theory between capital letters Critical Theory (one) and genealogical critique (two).[52] Applied to ethnography, the prefix *critical* has led to debates about research as scholarly activism,[53] and its practical and representational politics.[54] Along the second line, scholars argue that ethnography "does not only hold potential for abstract philosophical critiques of politics, but is also a form of political critique itself, both in its evidence-making and its descriptive and analytical elaborations."[55] It becomes "critical" by being an "instrument of imagination,"[56] a way to offer "unusual references"[57] and "problematizing redescriptions."[58] This second, more genealogical and practical understanding of critique is the one underlying my discussion here, as it speaks directly to questions of writing and imagination. Speaking of imagination, how are our three special guests doing?

Writing and Critical Ethnography

The Lab Rat

In 2013, Michael Billig published a book called *Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. "This is a book," Billig explains on page one,

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[52] See Fassin, D. (2017). The Endurance of Critique. *Anthropological Theory*, 17(1): 4–29; Wellgraf, S. (2020) After Exoticism: Ethnography as Critique. *Journal of European Ethnology and Cultural Analysis*, 49(0): 4–23.

[53] Foucault, M. (2007). What is Critique? In S. Lotringer and L. Hochroth, eds. *The Politics of Truth*, Semiotexte, pp. 41–82.; Coleman, L.M. (2015). Ethnography, Commitment, and Critique: Departing from Activist Scholarship. *International Political Sociology*, 9(3): 263–280; Englund, H. (2006). *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor*. University of California Press.

[54] Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E., eds. (1986). *Writing Culture*. University of California Press.

[55] Biehl, J. and Mckay, R. (2012). Ethnography as Political Critique. *Anthropological Quarterly*, *85*(4): 1209–1227.

[56] Ibid., p. 1216.

[57] Wellgraf (2020), p. 18.

[58] Shapiro, I. (2002). Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, or What's Wrong with Political Science and What to Do about It. *Political Theory,* 30(4), p. 615.

"which complains about poor writing in the social sciences" and offers criticism not as an outsider looking in, but as an insider challenging his own practice.[59]

Billig's criticism has two intertwining threads. The first examines the conditions of academic work characterised by economic competition in a publish or perish culture, and the need for ceaseless self-promotion. The second is the claim that this "culture of competition and self-promotion is seeping into the content of our academic writing."[60] "When we write, we are constantly boasting about our approaches, our concepts, our theories" (ibid). This boasting style has two key characteristics: turning verbs into nouns and writing in the passive voice. Rather than speaking about reifying, for example, academics speak of reification. Importantly, this is not only an aesthetic problem but one that includes political consequences. The first is that actors disappear. "By rolling out the big nouns," Billig writes, social scientists can write in highly unpopulated ways, creating "fictional worlds in which their theoretical things, rather than actual people, appear as the major actors."[61] Consider this example: a first draft of a newspaper headline reads "police attacked protestors." A later draft may morph into "Protestors attacked" or "Attack of protestors." While one can go from the first to the second and the second to the third version, going from the third to the second or back to the first is impossible. The police action disappears in the nouns. The same happens in academic writing, Billig argues. A second, related issue is the use of the passive voice. Rather than saying who does or did what, academic writing is experiencing a wave of "passivization."[62] Methodologically, this is linked to the primacy of positivism, replicability and objectivity and the desire of the social sciences to emulate the natural sciences. By using the passive voice, e.g., saying "data was collected," "scientific writers can clear the stage of human actors, [… and] can present their methods and their findings as being independent of the identity of the researcher."[63]

This is where the lab rat comes in. By modelling both our methods and our writing on the natural sciences, social scientists are tempted to write things like "the rats were injected" as "[i]t does not matter, who injected the rats or who ran the statistical tests, for the results should have been just the same." No researcher in chemistry would write "My nice, friendly research assistant ran the experiment" or "Our Italian statistician found significant results."[64] Bringing up this extra information raises questions about the role of friendliness or nationality in lab experiments. These questions are avoided by writing in the passive voice. This is where the argument for the rat's critical potential for ethnography comes in: Ethnography's attention to minute details, overlooked contexts and an effort to ground abstract debates can – and usually will – avoid nominalisation and passivation.

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[59] Billig, M. (2013). *Learn to Write Badly, Learn to Write Badly: How to Succeed in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge University Press: p. 1.

[60] Ibid., p. 5.

[61] Ibid., p. 7.

[62] Ibid., p. 117.

[63] Ibid., p. 129.

[64] Ibid., p. 129.

This avoidance has stylistic benefits, i.e., the text is nicer to read; and holds the critical potential to produce texts that account for their own origins and have not cleared the stage of human actors, including the researcher.

We can better understand – in the second sense of critique outlined above – how accounts of the world come to be a certain way (our academic arguments included), if we insist on highlighting *who* "injected the rats" and how that *who* influenced both the injection and the rat. All reports of *what* we observe are incomplete without reflections on *how* we observe it, from *where*, when and with(out) *whom*. This attitude will challenge the myth of the "lone ethnographer"[65] and replace it with, on the one hand, descriptions of collaboration and collective thinking, and, on the other hand, the inescapability of hierarchies and partialities at the heart of ethnographic work. Ethnographers know all about the fate of the rat, of course, as the debate on *reflexivity* and *positionality*. The point here is that this debate is not only methodologically important in terms of how ethnography is done; but also highlights the approach's critical potential by linking it to debates on how groundedness, social and political tensions, and relatable details are written either out of or into the text.

The Wolfdog

In 2005, Piers Vitebsky published a book called *The Reindeer People: Living with animals and spirits in Siberia* that follows the Eveny people, a community of Siberian reindeer herders, through the final years of the Soviet Union. One of these characters Vitebsky meets is a one-eyed wolfdog who can see into the future. Vitebsky first hears about the wolfdog from Ivan, one of the reindeer herders, during a conversation about the prophetic powers of the camp bonfire. "I [Vitbeksy] asked Ivan's family whether the fire had foretold our arrival. 'We heard it from the village that you were coming this month', Granny, the camp's matriarch, answers. 'But it was the fire that told us you'd arrive today'. 'The dog knew too', added Ivan, 'something of my father passed into that dog.'"[66] In a later scene, when they are talking about whether rain dances actually work, Vitbeksy says "'If you believe it enough it would work for you – like your father's dog'. 'That's true', [Ivan] laughed. 'I am certain about that dog.'"[67]

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[65] Brown, S. G. (2004). Beyond Theory Shock: Ethos, Knowledge, and Power in Critical Ethnography. In Burawoy et al. eds. *Ethnography Unbound: From Theory Shock to Critical Praxis*. University of Califorania Press, pp. 299–315.

[66] Vitebsky, P. (2005). *The Reindeer People: Living with Animals and Spirits in Siberia*. Houghton Mifflin, p. 88.

Vitebsky faithfully includes the wolfdog in his study of the Eveny and argues towards the end of the book that "I might have pressed [the herders] to ask them what they 'really' believed, what they 'really felt' … but that would have been giving into my newcomer's impatience. My quest to enter the inner world of the Eveny could not be fulfilled by such direct, crude questions, but only by sharing their daily work, witnessing their life stories, and reflecting on their experiences of spirits and dreams. The life of other people is a mystery one can never plumb in to the full."[68]

The retelling of the fate of Vitbeksy's wolfdog in Timothy Pachirat's book, *Among Wolves,*[69] indicates what can happen when parts of the worlds we study are *not* taken seriously. At first, the wolfdog tells an epic tale about different ethnographic studies done around the world and includes his own story about how he met – and was studied by – Vitebsky. "And I saw myself," the wolfdog says, "but I saw myself through the eyes of this white outsider … And I saw that this stranger, Piers, believed neither in my mystical powers nor in the others' understanding of my powers. He was kind, courteous and friendly [… and] brought with him an open and inquiring mind and a big heart."[70] But, the wolfdog continues, "it was an openness and a curiosity that at once sought to understand our land as it is and as we ourselves see it – and simultaneously to translate our land and ourselves into a language and a way of seeing not our own."[71]

When the wolfdog describes the experience of being objectified by the ethnographer, his voice wavers, his body sinks lower and lower to the ground, stiffening before going completely numb. "When this stranger took out his notebook and his lead pencil and his tape recorder and began to inscribe us … I felt myself for the first time as pure materiality, as mere wolfdog … my birthright powers, the powers that come into being in the spaces of possibility between myself and the world around me, vanished under his gaze."[72] Under the "rational" eyes of the ethnographer, in other words, the wolfdog's magical powers died. This might happen, if we exclude other ways of seeing and being in the world from our descriptions. And if we don't, how "critical" – especially in the second sense of the word outlined above – can those descriptions be?

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[67] Ibid., p. 101.

[68] Ibid., p. 394.

[69] Pachirat, T. (2018). *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power*. Routledge.

[70] Ibid., p. 7.

[71] Ibid., p. 7.

[72] Ibid., p. 7.

Ethnographers bother about the fate of the wolfdog in debates on *epistemic openness* and *humility*. These debates are central to the critical potential of ethnography. Remembering the wolfdog and taking him seriously is a reminder of the presence of other ontologies. It is the critical ethnographer's job to explore them to the best of our abilities. The wolfdog is a reminder not to disqualify other ways of seeing the world, and cautions that things might be different than they appear at first glance. This is crucial for reflecting on an approach that has been complicit in regimes of physical and epistemic violence associated with global systems of inequality and extraction.

The Cuttlefish

In 1945, George Orwell wrote an essay called *Politics and the English language* that starts from the observation that "the English language … becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts."[73]

Hopeful despite his dire historical moment, Orwell deems this process reversible. If modern, written English could rid itself of its bad habits, critical political regeneration becomes possible. His argument is primarily about the language of everyday politics, that is, newspapers, speeches, press statement and political reports. But he also includes the ways in which these events are recorded by observers, including academics. The core issue, Orwell says, is that "political language largely consists of euphemisms, question begging and sheer cloudy vagueness."[74]

He gives the following example: "Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire … this is called *pacification*."[75] The invention of such terms is necessary if "one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them."[76] Orwell gives another example of "some comfortable English professor" who defends Russian totalitarianism.[77] This person cannot say "I believe in killing off your opponents"; rather he will say something like: "While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement."[78] By the end of the sentence, the reader is numb.

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[73] Orwell, G. ([1945] 1984). *Politics and the English Language*. Penguin Books Ltd.

[74] Orwell 1984, p. 14.

[75] Ibid., p. 14, emphasis in original.

[76] Ibid., p. 14–15.

[77] Ibid., p. 15.

Enter the cuttlefish. Inflated language blurs its own outlines, covers up its content and dilutes necessary details. Writing sentences like the above, Orwell argues, is "like a cuttlefish squirting out ink."[79] And such squirting is no innocent act for it often appears when there is a "gap between one's real and one's declared aims."[80] For Orwell, this gap is a tool of deception: "The great enemy of clear language," he says, "is insincerity."[81] Like the ink that is muddying the waters, pretentious and unclear writing allows the writer to hide behind their words, and to distort their content into unrecognizability.

What is the cuttlefish's link to critical ethnography? Critical ethnographers know that all (academic) redescriptions are necessarily partial. Yet, the argument for partiality is not a free pass for writing whatever. Even though the ethnographer's account is bounded, they should do their best to see the world from another's point of view. Ethnographic method books explain how to do that: learn local languages, get fieldwork grants, seek familiarity in unfamiliar surroundings. All of this has to do with working the *participant* side of the participant-observer hyphen. The cuttlefish, instead, draws attention to the role of the *observer*, and particularly when they leave the field, return to their academic homes, and start writing.

When we think of the cuttlefish, we remember that the ethnographer's translation of the observed will always be an interpretation. And the first step towards ensuring that this interpretation is sincere, in Orwell's words, is to keep it from drowning in the ink of academic jargon.

This may actually come close to the first reading of criticism outlined above. Brown,[82] for instance, has argued that with the reflexive turn, "critical ethnography has radically altered its goals. The desired outcomes have shifted from the career-oriented pursuit of knowledge about the Other to fostering political agency with the Other." He calls this "dialogic solidarity with participants."[83] Beyond the research participant "other," we can add other *others* that may engage with our finished "Ethnography" (as text). The minimum that they can expect from such an account, and for it to even begin to unfold its critical potential, is that they can understand it.

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[78] Ibid., p. 15.

[79] Ibid., p. 15.

[80] Ibid., p. 15.

[81] Ibid., p. 15.

[82] Brown (2004), p. 307.

[83] Ibid., p. 306.

Ethnographers know all about the fate of the cuttlefish, of course, as debates on *representation, rapport* and, following Orwell, *sincerity*. If we take these debates seriously, we can write Ethnographies that (more) people can read and relate to, and new ways of thinking about the world open up.

Curious Creatures and What They Stand For

Ethnographic research is a process that involves doing a range of things, including observing, participating, translating, interpreting, and writing. In all of these stages, ethnography becomes "critical" by being an "instrument of imagination."[84] Ethnography becomes a critical exercise, if it can manage to establish "unusual references"[85] or offer "problematizing redescriptions"[86] of well-known facts. In all of this, who are our three curious guests? And what do they stand for?

The lab rat, the wolfdog and the cuttlefish are metaphors to think about how one of the core practices that ties ethnographic work together – writing – may live up to its critical potential.

The rat reminds us to write about the *doing* of ethnographic research in a critical key; the wolfdog reminds us to *interpret* critically; and the cuttlefish makes a critical plea for *communicating* our arguments clearly. By thinking about them, critique can be embedded in every stage of ethnography. All of this is important because if we accept that our work is a craft, part of our critical attitude means turning one eye back onto ourselves and the products we present under ethnographic labels. Put more plainly, we should be prepared to explain where our arguments came from, acknowledge their shortcomings and blind spots, or even admit that we were seduced into insincerity by -isms, -ities or other big words.

Transparency about what we did, or *reflexive attention to positionality*; a reminder that our line of sight is always political and partial, or *epistemic humility*; and an ambition to nevertheless do the work and write about it, or *commitment to sincerity* become key virtues of (writing) critical ethnography. To remember them better when we are "out there," in the thick of it, we can imagine them as a lab rat, a wolfdog and a cuttlefish.

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[84] Biehl and McKay (2012), p. 1216.

[85] Wellgraf (2020), p. 18.

[86] Shapiro (2002), p. 615.

The Superstructure Counts! Why We Need Ethnography in Order to Understand and Critique Capitalism

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My work is based on the assumption that capital exploits labour. Or, to put it more neutrally, during the production process, the capitalists' employees produce added value that is not distributed in wages and becomes the capitalist's profit. However, capitalism exploits people in various ways and people experience this exploitation differently. Some unite and struggle against capitalism, but most do not. Some may be desperate and angry but too scared to act, some may be unhappy but locate their problems outside their exploitative relationships with capitalists, some may really enjoy their lives even if they are being exploited, some may like benefiting from the exploitation of others, some may be simply indifferent – the list goes on. Capitalism, that much we know, creates different material realities for different people as well as different interpretations of those realities.

One important reason for this variance is, as Doreen Massey has argued in her seminal work *Spatial Divisions of Labor*, that "a capitalist society is far more than the capitalist mode of production."[87] Many authors in different disciplines have acknowledged that the bourgeois control over means of production and the exploitation of labour is not all there is to capitalist realities. The sociologists Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, for instance, have employed the notion of *cultural political economy*[88] to capture a link between meaning-making and the reproduction of capital. Also, an interdisciplinary debate between historians and anthropologists has developed around the concept of *uneven and combined development* highlighting how the exploitation of labour is connected to various political, geographical and cultural factors.[89] In Marxist terms, we can subsume those positions under the heading of: the superstructure counts! As Raymond Williams has argued, we cannot detach the base (economy) from the superstructure (institutions, forms of consciousness, and political and cultural practices): "these are not separate 'areas' or 'elements' but the whole, specific activities and products of real [wo]men."[90] Cultural phenomena are not necessarily defined by an "economic" logic of capitalist accumulation. Rather, the exploitation of natural resources and labour is always limited by, competes with, or appropriates socially negotiated conventions, aspirations, expectations, and desires. It is this specific and concrete interweaving of base and superstructure that ethnography is particularly well suited to analysing. As ethnographic research emphasizes the complexity and messiness of the everyday, it has a tendency to privilege concrete realities over theoretical generalizations.[91] It can, therefore, complement a blind spot in what Williams evaluated as a Marxist "orthodox analysis": "Orthodox analysts began to think of 'the base' and 'the superstructure' as if they were separable concrete entities. In doing so they lost sight of the very processes – not abstract relations but constitutive processes – which it should have been the special function of historical materialism to emphasize."[92] While some Marxist thinkers have collapsed the clear distinction between base and superstructure by arguing that social, political, and cultural things influence the economy and vice versa, others have criticized this approach as rather trivial and not particularly useful.[93] Terry Eagleton, for instance, has emphasized the usefulness of the base/superstructure distinction, because although "in the broad anthropological sense of the word, the economic is cultural too."[94] This conflation of one with the other is too general to tell us something meaningful about the world. Here, I agree with the assumption that processes of production and distribution are always linked to social meaning-making is commonsensical. That is exactly why we should not dismiss it. It is not the task of "proper" social science to wash away ideas that are easily understood and make common sense. Rather, we must use the trivial fact that the economic is always cultural as the starting point for further inquiry. What are the important political, cultural, and social dynamics that define, restrict and engender the reproduction of capital in a given context? Asking those questions means that we cannot assume subjects but that we must research how subjects are formed. Aspirations and needs of both capitalists and workers are not a given, but research has to investigate how desires are created and reproduced. As Samuli Schielke has argued, we have to understand relations of production as relations of imagination[95] and vice versa. Thus, we cannot properly understand capitalism without understanding people's aspirations, desires and expectations. Ethnography is particularly good at doing that. This is because ethnographic research usually aims at knowing people's realities on their own terms and at understanding how they make sense of their lives, how they understand the world, their own place in it and what they consider legitimate and useful forms of acting therein.

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[87] Massey, D. (1995). *Spatial Divisions of Labor: Social Structure and the Geography of Production.* Routledge, p. 17.

[88] Sum, N.-L.and Jessop, B. (2013). *Towards a Cultural Political Economy: Taking the Cultural Turn in Economics*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

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[89] Hoffmann, M. and Strümpel, C. eds. (2023). *Industrial Labour in an Unequal World: Ethnographic Perspectives on Uneven and Combined Development*. De Gruyter; Gill, L., and Kasmir, S. (2018). No Smooth Surfaces. The Anthropology of Unevenness and Combination, *Current Anthropology* 59(4): 355–377; Makki, F. (2015). Reframing development theory: the significance of the idea of uneven and combined development, *Theory and Society* 44(5), pp. 471–497.

[90] Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford University Press, p. 80.

[91] Schatz, E., ed. (2009). *Political Ethnography*. University of Chicago Press.

[92] Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and Literature*, p. 81.

[93] Sesardić, N. (1985). How has Marxism Survived? In: Sesardić, N. and Settembrini, D., eds., *Marxist Utopia?,* Center for Research into Communist Economies, pp. 9–64.

[94] Eagleton, T. (2000). Base and Superstructure Revisited, *New Literary History* 31(2): 240.

In the case of my own ethnographic research inside a French electronics factory in Tunisia, I found that employees' aspirations correspond to certain development promises that structure their experience in the factory and create consent with global capitalist exploitation.[96] Founded in 2003, the factory is in an industrial zone in the southern part of Tunis. Many workers live in the buzzing, lower middle-class neighbourhoods nearby, while others come from all over the capital to work in the south of the city. During my field work in 2017 and 2018, I found that most of the 450 workers, who are all Tunisians, sincerely like the factory and their jobs, even though they do not earn enough to pay for what they consider to be a good life. They liked the factory's overall atmosphere, which they would describe as "clean," "orderly," and "disciplined." They like the amicable professionalism with which people treat each other and the mutual respect that comes with it. Many employees see these features as something that sets the factory apart from the rest of Tunisia which they describe as chaotic and insecure. And indeed, the factory is highly bureaucratic and organized: lines on the floor signal how to move on the shop floor and with what kind of shoes, signs on the walls tell people how to sit or lift properly, how to clean up their work place at the end of each shift, and that there is "a place for everything and everything is in its place." Anything that does not correspond to a pre-set plan is registered as a “non-conformity” on little notes that are sent to the quality management. All of this, employees would tell me, creates “peace of mind” and “comfort.”

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[95] Schielke, S. (2020). *Migrant Dreams. Egyptian Workers in the Golf States*. The American University in Cairo Press, p. 38.

[96] Weißenfels, A. (forthcoming). *Development at Work. Global Capitalism, Postcolonial Imaginaries, and Everyday Life in a Factory in Tunisia*. Springer Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

Most people in the factory, from the lowest level, manual worker to upper management personnel, consider themselves to be middle class. The latter is closely related to the fact that almost everyone aspires to the same things: a car, a house, marriage, children, and a “proper job” in their field of education. Some add to this the desire to travel to other countries. As I show elsewhere,[97] those aspirations correspond to development promises that the postcolonial Tunisian state gave its citizens and renewed regularly throughout its history. Theses promises linked a set of material prospects like housing, jobs, welfare and health to various “modern” sensitivities such as cleanliness, science and statistics, discipline and order, predictability and stability. More concretely, in the future that was and continues to be promised to Tunisians, they would not only have a lot of nice things, but they would also live in a clean, ordered, and stable environment.

While the Tunisian state has failed to live up to its promise, it created imaginaries that the employees use as an important reference framework to assess their position in life. Against that framework, employees come to an ambiguous conclusion: they don’t have a good life, but they have a good job. For many of them, the factory is the one place that looks and feels like development. If their salary, which they know is decent compared to other factories in Tunisia, does not pay for a good life, they usually do not blame the company. They instead blame politicians, corruption, inflation, Tunisian culture, the unions, the revolution, or plain and simple Tunisia. They debate those things during their breaks where they continue to happily align their own interests with that of the firm. What remains out of sight is the fact that they are exploited by French capital, which flows to Tunisia attracted by low wages[98] and off-shore tax advantages.

This shows that, from an individual perspective, capitalist exploitation represents simply a particular set of chances and limits. Those are measured against socially constructed imaginations and people’s relationships to capitalist exploitation depends, to a large extent, on how they assess their own position within those chances and limits. In the case of the factory, employees do not view themselves as exploited by capitalism but as betrayed by the Tunisian state.

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[97] Weißenfels, A. (2023). A Good Job But Not A Good Life: Ambiguous Realities and Uneven and Combined Development in a Tunisian Factory. In: M. Hoffmann and C. Strümpel, eds., *Industrial Labour in an Unequal World: Ethnographic Perspectives on Uneven and Combined Development*, De Gruyter, pp. 157–176.

[98] Bernard, R. and Dubat, A. (2008). La Tunisie. Terre de délocalisations, *Institut national de l’audiovisuel*, April 26, 2008., https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/3611760001016/la-tunisie-terre-de-delocalisations.

What Is There to Criticise?

What is the starting point for critique when we realize that the concerns of the people in the field differ from our analysis of structures of inequality? What do we as researchers do if people, like the ones I met in the factory in Tunisia, dream of a very ordinary middle-class life within capitalist structures of accumulation and exploitation?

Obviously, as the interest in the life-worlds and ideas of our research participants is central to ethnographic methodology, we should do our best to represent their reality as precisely and faithfully as possible. We should also learn from their perspectives on life. But this is where it becomes complicated. What exactly do we learn when our interlocutors do not share our critique? If capitalism does not seem so bad after all for people in a certain context, should we dismiss a Marxist critique and evaluate people's realities on their own terms? Or do we insist on that critique by claiming that our interlocuters are being exploited, even though they do not perceive this exploitation as a problem? I decided to do the latter and analyse exactly why workers in the factory did not see capitalist exploitation as a problem.

This comes with methodological challenges as it reproduces a certain scientific hubris that exists in (Western) academia overall and that has always been part of Marxist analyses. The assumption is that we know some kind of actual truth about people's lives of which they are unaware. This assumption is particularly visible when Marx uses concepts like "commodity fetish" or "false consciousness" to argue that people, in general, and workers, in particular, do not see the world around them and their place in it for what it is. There is a benefit to this kind of academic arrogance as well as obvious problems. Social theorists can see things that others cannot because they are trained to focus on a particular aspect of reality that is usually hidden in the infinite messiness of people's actual lives. On the other hand, a particular theoretical lens can never be a substitute for understanding the multi-dimensional complexity of the world in which most ethnographic research takes place. As David Graeber and David Wengrow have pointed out:

"Social theory is largely a game of make-believe, in which we pretend, just for the sake of argument, that there's just one thing going on: essentially, we reduce everything to a cartoon so as to be able to detect patterns that would be otherwise invisible. As a result, all real progress in social sciences has been rooted in the courage to say things that are, in the final analysis, slightly ridiculous: the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Claude Lévi-Strauss being only particularly salient cases in point. One must simplify the world to discover something new about it. The problem comes when, long after the discovery has been made, people continue to simplify."[99]

Thus, we should try to highlight the complexity of people's realities while preserving Marx' slightly ridiculous discovery that everything somehow has to do with the reproduction of capital through exploitation of labour. That means taking the superstructure seriously: taking seriously our interlocutors' realities and understanding of the world, while stressing how they are embedded in the reproduction of global capitalism. This creates a tension between a) representing and taking at face value our interlocutors' perspectives and b) evaluating those perspectives based on our own assumptions about (and critique of) the world. It is a tension we have to endure and to navigate as best we can. We should be as flexible as possible in shifting back and forth between our interlocutors' and our own interpretations of their lives. In this way, we can push a Marxist approach towards the life worlds of people implicated in global capitalism without losing our critique of capitalism.

In my own research, I constantly shift between citing my research participants as experts whose ideas inspired my understanding of the world, and analysing them as research "objects" whose ideas I interpret in my own way. Most of the time, for instance, I use the term "employees" instead of "workers" to describe people doing low-level manual labour in the factory. I chose the term because they mostly did not talk about themselves as "workers" and the notion did not play an important role in how they made sense of their lives. Sometimes, however, when I talk about them in a decidedly Marxist framework, as in this text, I use the term workers because it places them inside my own ("slightly ridiculous") theoretical analysis and critique of the world.

Another example is the way I deal with the notion of middle class. When the workers told me that they perceived themselves as middle class, I both took this information at face value and interpreted it in a way that most employees themselves did not. On the one hand, I realized that on a certain level, it is empirically true that the factory workers represented the socio-economic middle of Tunisia and in an overall global comparison. On the other hand, I also found that their lives mostly did not correspond to their own definition of a middle-class life which everybody agreed consisted of owning a car and a house, being married, and being able to travel. People therefore belong to the middle class not only because of their actual socio-economic position in global production and distribution networks, but also because they aspire to a particular lifestyle which they can anticipate but are not yet able to afford yet. Therefore, I learned two things from my interlocutors' assessment of their position in life. Firstly, empirical socio-economic positions in global capitalism vary a lot and they do not have to be "bad" for workers in factories – actually, I have since come to understand that the most marginalized groups in global structures of capitalist accumulation are generally not industrial workers, but the huge number of small-scale farmers and urban unemployed. In this respect, my interlocutors' perspective proved far more accurate than my own preconceptions. Secondly, the way in which the factory workers are implicated in the global reproduction of capital cannot meet their material aspirations of a middle-class life. Nevertheless, it remains close enough for the workers to identify with it in the sense that they find their aspired life realistic. Here, I interpret the worker's aspirations and self-perception differently than they usually do.

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[99] Graeber, D. and Wengrow, D. (2022). *The Dawn of Everything*. Penguin Books, p. 21.

Overall, in my work, the fact that workers do not feel particularly exploited by capital becomes the subject of an inquiry that assumes exactly this exploitation. I trace workers' dreams, fears and expectations to a collective development imaginary which is closely linked to the development promises made by the post-colonial Tunisian state throughout its history. Desire, here, is not simply a fact as I do not understand the subjectivities I encountered in the field as a given. Rather, I try to look "behind" desire and try to understand how it is linked to ideology, historical contexts, and everyday (capitalist) realities. What workers I talked to in my field want from their lives is linked to a set of development promises: promises made to "the Tunisian people" in an anti-colonial state building project with a nationalist ideology. Promises connected to the re-positioning of Tunisia inside global capitalist structures of production and distribution using successive "development strategies." Those promises were central to creating a raison d'état after Tunisia had become nominally independent. They defined a governmental agenda to build infrastructure, educate people and find a place for Tunisia in international economic structures. At the same time, those promises generated the addressee for the state's development policies: the hard working, loyal, and modern Tunisian citizen. Successive developmental strategies – ranging from state capitalism aimed at domestic production in the 1960s to market-liberal capitalism based on private investment and export orientation since the 1970s – all were surrounded by the same promises of secure lives with modern jobs, cars and houses in a clean, orderly and respectable Tunisian nation. Those promises reverberate today in the expectations of workers I talked to and the fact that the overwhelming majority of them like the firm they work for. As Lauren Berlant has argued: "All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us."[100]

Berlant uses this premise to develop the concept of cruel optimism. Cruel optimism describes how people invest their hopes and dreams in something that paradoxically prevents those dreams from coming true. Objects of desire, Berlant argues, represent certain promises and can replace the fulfillment of those promises by making them tangible and present, while reality remains unchanged and continues "as usual." This keeps people invested in re-producing a reality that forecloses the materialization of those promises. Again, it is noteworthy that Berlant's argument is based on the premise that people fetishize certain objects of desire and that they do not see their optimism for what it "really" is, namely cruel. People, by optimistically engaging with those promises, actively help construct a world which prevents those promises from materializing.

For me, as a political scientist and historical materialist, that begs the following question: what are the promises that people optimistically attach themselves to? Which promises are they familiar with and which do they consider reasonable and appropriate? What can they imagine and what not? What alternative futures can be imagined and where do those alternative imaginaries come from? Desiring here is not an individual act ex nihilo, but a social and political negotiation of what is desirable and a constant (re)evaluation of the chances and limits to reaching the life one desires. In this sense, capitalism distributes both work and its material results as well as expectations and dreams. Those dreams can invoke a critique and even revolution, but they can also be deflected and invested into a site of capitalist exploitation like an offshore factory in Tunisia. Ethnography, as arguably the most intimate methodology that social science has to offer, allows us to understand these hopes and dreams and embed them in global structures of exploitation.

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[100] Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press, p. 23.

Queer Marxian Modalities of Critique in Anthropology: Generations, Approaches, Ends

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Queer Marxian (QM) modalities of critique arise at the coalescence of two tendencies in critical anthropology. One is the resurgence of Marxian approaches,[101] and the other is the momentum in queer anthropology.[102] Both fields of anthropology exhibit a growing theoretical sensibility for questions of capitalism, class, and labour intersecting with kinship, sexuality, and gender on which tender sprouts of QM start showing. One such sign is the formation of Q*ARX, a collective of anthropologists working with the productive tensions of Marxian and queer approaches of which both authors are part. As part of this effort, we will sketch genealogies and elements of queer Marxian possibilities in critical anthropology of the contemporary.

Anthropology is not a stranger to the modalities of queer Marxian critique. Its history is shaped by questions of how sexuality and kinship relate to the organisation of economic life. Yet, the surge in approaches that explicitly call themselves queer and Marxian has raised eyebrows. Queer, isn't that a Western invention too Eurocentric and pseudo-universal to make sense in ethnography? Marxian, that strange determinism that sees class everywhere and knows everything through theory already? Such "tired argument(s)," to borrow from Jafari Sinclair Allen,[103] should not keep us from seeing the usefulness of queer, or Marxian theories and ethnographies, and their history and complexities. We propose a conciliatory approach that thinks ethnographically and theoretically about the articulation of sexuality and gender with production and exchange and is curious about theoretical work in its vicinity.

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[101] Neveling, P., and Steur, L. (2018). Introduction. *Focaal* 2018(82): 1–15.

[102] Boyce, P., Engebretsen, E. L., and Posocco, S. (2018). Introduction: Anthropology's Queer Sensibilities. *Sexualities* 215(6): 843–852.

[103] Allen, J. S. (2016). View of One View from a Deterritorialized Realm: How Black/Queer Renarrativizes Anthropological Analysis. *Cultural Anthropology* 31(4): 617–626.

The recent surge of work sharing this sensibility draws on earlier discussions in 1970s neo-Marxism, the Black and Women of Colour critique of Western feminism, Marxist/ materialist feminism, and feminist kinship studies. Queer Marxism in anthropology, we propose, combines ethnographic research and comparative anthropology, bringing together six elements: 1) an epistemic critique of the way Euro-American normalisations of heterosexuality, nuclear families, and binary gender systems are conflated with analytical frameworks or theories; 2) a historical approach to the colonial destruction of livelihoods and ways of living and loving that differ from Western bourgeois ideals; 3) a critique of how capitalist social reproduction creates, integrates, and captures value created through labour; 4) an analysis of how exploitation and oppression works through sexuality, race, disability, and other processes of social differentiation and hierarchy; 5) an interest in the state as a site of struggle and maintenance of capitalist social relations; and 6) an ethnographic epistemology interested in the radical situatedness of life, desire, and love.

In the following, we will describe the sprouts of queer Marxian possibilities and sketch how they come into being, which ancestry they draw from, and how they are theoretically informed and ethnographically grounded. We will introduce themes that a QM sensibility sees and analyses. The interests of QM already inform the choice of themes as a critique of the role of sexuality and kinship in the social organisation of capitalist processes. Yet, its critical quality does not come automatically from its analytical scope. Hence, in the last part, we will summarise three allied approaches we think can enhance the potential of QM as critique: immanent, abolitionist, and fugitive.

Queer Marxian Critique as Critical Sensibility

Scholars like Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke,[104] Kevin Floyd,[105] Christopher Chitty[106] and Verónica Gago[107] are key to refocusing on the transformative potential of a queer/trans and materialist critique of contemporary societies. The differences in their vantage points and theoretical propositions are worth considering, yet we do not intend to debate these differences here. What concerns us is how theoretical and ethnographic sensibilities allow for "an opening."[108] For anthropological scholarship, queer Marxian approaches are an opening to rethink orientation and ancestry, see the manifold forms of living and loving documented by ethnographers, and reconsider how this knowledge was used and abused in disciplinary history. What does the opening offer? The following section can be read as an overview of themes and scholars, who contribute to the theoretical sensibilities of a critique highly necessary in a world currently shifting to the right, with deadly consequences for queer and trans people, and many others as well.

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[104] Gleeson, J. J., and O'Rourke, E., eds. (2021). *Transgender Marxism*. Pluto Press.

[105] Floyd, K. (2009). *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. University of Minnesota Press.

[106] Chitty, C. (2020). *Sexual hegemony: statecraft, sodomy and capital in the rise of the world system*. Duke University Press.

[107] Gago, V. (2020). *Feminist international*. Verso.

The Queerness of QM

The story of "queer" from a slur to a scholarly orientation with main character vibes is grand, tedious, and has pissed many off. Interesting and complicated relationships abound in its history, such as tensions between feminist and queer studies.[109] QM sensibilities learn from both, building on a renewed social reproduction theory,[110] gay and lesbian studies, and transgender studies, especially their revolutionary and anti-capitalist corners.[111]

Queer Marxian anthropology, focusing on sexuality, gender, and kinship in capitalist livelihoods and societal organisation, can draw from decades, if not centuries, of anthropological scholarship. Anthropology has long been aware of ways of loving and living that colonialist frameworks demean or exoticize. Without shoehorning this variety into an all-encompassing "queerness," our attempts to relate queerness to capitalism can still learn from them.[112]

One strand of scholarship locates alternatives to a familiar "heterosexual matrix."[113] Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's work on the "invention of women"[114] highlights sex/gender systems not premised on biological binarism encountering colonial domination.[115] Leslie Feinberg's "Transgender Warriors" sketches the suppression of indigenous sex/gender systems.[116] Contemporary ethnographers, such as Gayatri Reddy,[117] Serena Dankwa,[118] and Vaibhav Saria,[119] similarly describe same-sex desire and gender non-conformity ("not conforming" to either Euro-American or vernacular expectations) in terms of social assignments of status, economic role, and oppression.

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[108] Malanasan IV, M. F. (2016). Queer Anthropology: An Introduction. *Cultural Anthropology* 31(4): 595–597.

[109] Huffer, L. (2013). *Are the Lips a Grave?* Columbia University Press.

[110] Bhattacharya, T., ed. (2017). *Social reproduction theory*. Pluto Press.

[111] Sears, A. (2005). Queer Anti-Capitalism: What's Left of Lesbian and Gay Liberation? *Science & Society* 69(1): 92–112; Gleeson, J. J., and O'Rourke, E. (2021). Introduction. In: J. J. Gleeson, and E. O'Rourke, eds., *Transgender Marxism*, Pluto Press, pp. 1–32.

[112] Peano, I. (2019). Gender, Utopias and the Savage Slot: The Role of Anthropology in the (De)Construction of a Concept. *Ethics in Progress* 10(1): 112–128.

[113] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity.* Routledge.

[114] Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The invention of women*. University of Minnesota Press.

[115] See also Blackwood, E., and Wieringa, S., eds. (1999). *Female desires*. Columbia University Press.

[116] Feinberg, L. (1996). *Transgender warriors: making history from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*. Beacon Press.

A second fertile ground for the sprouting of QM focuses on the political economy of sex. While queer studies later disavowed Marxism in a turn to post-structuralism, Gayle Rubin articulated Levi-Strauss's anthropology of kinship with Marxist political economy and nascent lesbian and gay studies.[120] A contemporary perspective comes from Valentini Sampethai,[121] who looks at how sex-workers in Athens mitigate their vulnerability to state violence and poverty through labour in/on their community. Sampethai, a member of Q*ARX, combines a clear view of labour and capitalist social reproduction with a sensibility to sexuality and gender.

Finally, some approaches take a queer lens on the social accomplishment of sex, desire, and all kinds of relationships (not just avowedly queer ones). Tom Boellstorff and Naisargi Dave write that since the mid-2000s, anthropologists whose initial research explored queer themes often took their second project, and queer perspective elsewhere, working, e.g., on labour or political contestation.[122] Margot Weiss points to a "distinct and constitutive polarity"[123] between narrower and more expansive understandings of queerness, studying labour, race, disability, and other themes. For queer Marxian critique, this tension is productive: taking seriously the specificities and the diversity of queerness, while taking its findings out and into other fields of scholarship, such as Marxian anthropologies, to which we now look to see the confluence from another direction.

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[117] Reddy, G. (2010). *With Respect to Sex*. University of Chicago Press.

[118] Dankwa, S. (2021). *Knowing Women: Same-Sex Intimacy, Gender and Identity in Post-Colonial Ghana.* Cambridge University Press.

[119] Saria, V. (2021). *Hijras, Brothers, Lovers: Surviving sex and poverty in rural India.* Fordham University Press.

[120] Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in Women. In: R. R. Reiter, ed., *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, Monthly Review Press, pp. 157–210.

[121] Sampethai, V. (2022). Workers, Migrants, and Queers: The political economy of community among illegalised sex workers in Athens. *Anti-Trafficking Review*(19): 28–46.

[122] Boellstorff, T., and Dave, N. N. (2015). Introduction: The Production and Reproduction of Queer Anthropology. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-the-production-and-reproduction-of-queer-anthropology. 24.05.2023.

[123] Weiss, M. (2022). Queer Theory from Elsewhere and the Im/Proper Objects of Queer Anthropology. *Feminist Anthropology* 3(2): 315–335.

Marxian Inspirations of QM

Marxian anthropology is firing up again after the financial crisis of 2007/ 08, with renewed interest in questions of labour, production, distribution, and accumulation.[124] Despite critics framing Marxism as external to anthropology, it was crucial in its history, and relations bore fruits.[125] In the 1970s and 80s, this culminated in a golden age of anthropological neo-Marxism. Amid the Cold War persecution of socialist thinking, authors such as Eleanor Leacock, Eric Wolf, Sidney Mintz, and Claude Meillassoux furthered Marxism in their historical and ethnographic work. Critical edge came from anti-colonial scholars,[126] and from Black women and Women of Colour criticising Western Marxism and white feminism. Audre Lorde[127] and Chandra Talpaty Mohanty[128] theorised intersecting oppressions of class, race, sexuality, and gender in the capitalist, colonial, and post-colonial world, an ongoing inspiration for queer Marxian critique today.

Key insights come from scholarship on social reproduction – the main umbrella for investigating capitalist social relations in contemporary Marxian anthropology. As an approach, it proposes a unity or complementarity of the productive and reproductive labours that sustain societies, along with their hierarchies, oppressions, and structures.[129] This analytical breadth allows a situated enquiry of how relations of kinship, sexuality, and race order (and are ordered by) capitalist relations of production, reproduction and exchange, allowing for certain kinds of livelihoods while foreclosing others. Within social reproduction approaches, one might differentiate between substantivist and Marxian perspectives. Both have vantage points and blind spots, and they work best, if they work together. In contrast to formalists, who narrowly define the economy as maximising behaviour in formal market settings, substantivists are interested in the variety of how societies organise their reproduction, in keeping with anthropology's long-standing interest in the co-relation of kinship and economic life. Substantivists look at kinship, sex/gender systems, racial categorisation and other elements of social structure and cultural hegemony.[130] Neo-Marxian scholarship often relates a substantivist ontology to questions of the creation and capture of value. The work of Eleanor Leacock, for instance, studying Native American societies' sex/gender systems is as substantivist as it is Marxian. Maria Mies's account of rural Indian lace-making cottage industries challenged the production/reproduction distinction, while powerfully combining Marxist-feminist and anthropological perspectives.[131] A contemporary version of such combinations is the Gens Manifesto, whose authors explicitly call their approach substantivist feminism while proposing to link investigations of kinship, gender, labour, and capital accumulation.[132] Claude Meillassoux's[133] earlier investigation of sexual divisions of labour has recently been adapted by Hadas Weiss for contemporary settings.[134]

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[124] For instance, Carrier, J. G., & Kalb, D. (2015). *Anthropologies of Class: Power, Practice and Inequality*. Cambridge University Press; Narotzky, S. (ed.). (2020). *Grassroots Economies: Living with Austerity in Southern Europe*. Pluto Press.

[125] An excellent overview might be found in Neveling (2019).

[126] Asad, T., ed. (1973). *Anthropology & the Colonial Encounter*. Ithaca Press.

[127] Lorde, A. (2018). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. Penguin Books.

[128] Mohanty, C. T., Russo, A., and Torres, L., eds. (1991). *Third world women and the politics of feminism*. Indiana University Press.

[129] Weiss, H. (2018). Reclaiming Meillassoux for the age of financialization. *Focaal* 2018(82): 109–117.

Social reproduction scholarship and, more widely, Marxian or critical anthropologists also offer conceptual tools that can enrich queer Marxist critique. Such is the case with understanding class as "unstable, uneven, contradictory and antagonistic relational interdependences, [an] encompassing set of global, uneven, social and geographic power balances, surrounded by an array of unevenly assembled myths, ideologies and practices."[135] This relational definition opens up space to consider the sexual dynamics of class relations too. We have seen that QM seeks to explain the sexual and gendered underpinnings of political or economic inequity and the contingent political and economic dimensions of sexual marginality. Having sketched its theoretical sensibility and ethnographic orientation, however, what modalities of critique might QM engage? We suggest that QM can grow from contact with allied ways of relating analysis, emic perspectives, and desires for change to one another – chiefly those known as immanent, abolitionist, and fugitive.

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[130] Gudeman, S. (2001). *The anthropology of economy*. Blackwell; Leacock, E., et al. (1978). Women's Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution [and Comments and Reply]. *Current Anthropology* 19(2): 247–275.

[131] Mies, M. (2012). *The lace makers of Narsapur: Indian housewives produce for the world market*. Spinifex Press.

[132] Bear, L., et al. (2015). Gens: A Feminist Manifesto for the Study of Capitalism – *Cultural Anthropology*. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/652-gens-afeminist-manifesto-for-the-study-of-capitalism.

[133] Meillassoux, C. (1981). *Maidens, Meal and Money: Capitalism and the Domestic Community*. Cambridge University Press.

[134] Weiss, H. (2022). Social Reproduction as the reproduction of capitalism. *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* (93): 105–111; Weiss (2018).

[135] Kalb, D. (2015). Introduction: Class and the New Anthropological Holism. In: J. G. Carrier, and D. Kalb, eds., *Anthropologies of Class*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–27.

Critique is Made by Criticising

We chose sprouting as metaphor for the state of queer Marxian critique in anthropology. First tender arrivals are visible above a nourishing surface. And while contextual factors, such as the political-economic situation of the world after financial crises, climate emergencies, war, drought, and inflation, might provide nutrients and water for the sprouting, the rhizome beneath holds many more potential plants of a similar kind. Hence, our article is a sketch of the soil, the rhizome, and the sprouts. It should give readers an idea of the sensibilities of queer Marxian anthropology and its potential for a critique of the ways in which sex/gender systems articulate with capitalist social reproduction. We gestured at the various traditions within and beyond anthropology from which contemporary QM draws, clearly a child of its time, but one with mothers.

A lens does not make a critique. Critique, as Rahel Jaeggi and Tilo Wesche write, is both association and dissociation[136] – a little distance rather than full immersion. We suggest that QM can draw from modalities of critique developed in neighbouring approaches that make their assessment of a need for societal change, reform, or revolution explicit, and that provide an epistemology of how that need could be met. We will sketch three that we find particularly apt: immanent, abolitionist, and fugitive.

Immanent is a mode of critique of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, investigating whether a socio-cultural configuration (or an ontology) delivers what it promises.[137] Such modality would, for instance, hold a Western government accountable for reproducing inequality and hierarchies despite self-understandings of social inclusion and welfare.

Abolitionist thought is a recent modality of critique in anthropology. Abolitionism does not seek to reform harmful institutions and hierarchies of society, but is directed towards their abolition.[138] Black radical scholars such as Savanna Shange advance abolitionist anthropology by, e.g., criticising the ongoing legacies of slavery in US institutions. Such critique analyses how societal institutions are geared towards certain outcomes, hence proposing their removal or replacement. For QM, perspectives formulating the abolition of family or marriage as institutionalising a binary heteronormativity are specifically interesting.[139]

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[136] Jaeggi, R., and Wesche, T. (2021). Einführung: Was ist Kritik? In: R. Jaeggi, and T. Wesche, eds., *Was ist Kritik?*, Suhrkamp, pp. 7–22.

[137] Fraser, N., and Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory*. Polity Press.

[138] Shange, S. (2019). *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiblackness, + Schooling in San Francisco*. Duke University Press.

[139] Lewis, S. (2022). *Abolish the Family*. Verso.

Fugitive critiques[140] attempt to advance the decolonisation of scholarly disciplines, while at the same time "tak[ing] flight from that contested space we claim as our intellectual home."[141] Fugitive modalities take what they need from academic institutions, use what they get, and refuse to participate. They were developed by indigenous and Black scholars to account for the problematic draining of energy and resources that marginalised scholars face in academia. Instead of advocating the reform of institutions unwilling to reform, they proposed a fugitive stance.

All these are potential modalities of how queer Marxian work conceives its critical potential beyond disinterested scholarly analysis of the destructive organisation of a world geared towards capital accumulation instead of human and non-human needs and desires. Importantly, these are inspirations. For QM in anthropology, the work of proposing ways of relating ethnography, theory, and critique is ongoing and by no means mature, which it might not want to be anyway.

Queer Marxian sensibilities are sprouting in anthropology, and they provide possibilities for much-needed critiques of capitalist societies and their harms. The soil is there, as many anthropologists working on queer issues seek an understanding of capitalist social reproduction and the expulsion, integration and/or exploitation of various gendered livelihoods and sexualities, and as many scholars interested in the workings of capitalism develop an interest in the social organisation of gender binarism, heteronormativity, and interlocking systems of oppression. Hence, we might soon see queer Marxian modalities of critique are exuberant and highly necessary for working towards a world of living and loving in abundance.

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[140] Berry, M., et al. (2017). Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field. *Cultural Anthropology* 32(4): 537–565.

[141] Berry et al. (2017).

Critical Ethnography's Sense of Direction: Imagining Social Justice in Sacrifice Zones of Capital

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The heating planet and the accelerating extinction processes in recent years have motivated a number of environmental movements to ask tough questions about the economic system in which these devastations take place. "System change not climate change" is an increasingly frequent chant during demonstrations. But if capitalism is good at one thing, it is its capacity to incorporate such challenges, and to convert them into new frontiers and investment opportunities.[142] In early 2023, accordingly, the World Economic Forum acknowledged that "we" are "on the brink of a polycrisis," the failure of mitigating climate change on top of its list of long-term risks.[143] The resulting policy proposals typically throw the baby out with the bathwater, facilitating skyrocketing investments into yet another extractive market, such as the massive shift to exploiting minerals with a "green" framing.[144] Progressive political actors tend to jump on the bandwagon of such strategies, lacking an alternative analysis that contributes to systemic transformation.

Enter critical theory, its area of expertise being the transformative potential of the dialectical connection between crisis and critique.[145] In times of crisis, critical theory's goal is to advance transformation toward a just society through systematic critique. That is, to think dialectically but to produce a sense of direction for political subjects to strive for.[146] Following Horkheimer's famous treatise ([1937] 2011),[147] we understand the label "critical" as distinct from "problem-solving." Problem-solving research "takes the world as it finds it." It is interested in understanding existing relationships and institutions to ensure their smoother functioning. In contrast, critical theories transcend existing practice. They stand apart from the hegemonic order and want to transform it: "Critical theory [...] does not take institutions and social power relations for granted but calls them into question by concerning itself with their origins and how and whether they might be in the process of changing."[148] Importantly, critical theory aims to contribute to emancipatory change processes. The quality of a critical theory is therefore not measured in its h-index, but evaluated in terms of the transformational effects it contributes to emancipatory struggles.[149]

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[142] Boltanski, L., and Chiapello, E. (2018). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso; Dörre, K. (2009). Die neue Landnahme. Dynamiken und Grenzen des Finanzmarktkapitalismus. In: K. Dörre, S. Lessenich, and H. Rosa, eds., *Soziologie – Kapitalismus – Kritik. Eine Debatte*, Suhrkamp, pp. 21–86.

[143] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/polycrisis-global-risks-report-cost-of-living/.

[144] Ajl, M. (2021). *A People's Green New Deal*. Verso.

[145] Fassin, D., and Harcourt, B. (2019). *A Time for Critique*. Columbia University Press.

Yet, it is precisely critical theory's sense of direction ("progress") that has increasingly been called into question. Postcolonial and feminist scholars have objected that the idea of the sovereign theorist, who knows about the direction of emancipation, is unconsciously subscribed to western ideas of the Enlightenment that have led to the sacrificing of millions in the pursuit of progress in the first place, thus calling for the "end of progress."[150] These critics of critical theory have formulated an important caveat which the latter must encounter, namely that *critique* with its know-it-all attitude and structural analysis is often paternalistic and therefore cannot promote change. Why, in other words, should the dispossessed, who critical theory traditionally wanted to mobilize through its critique, listen to that critique in the first place?[151]

If we take this problem seriously, a deep understanding of and collaboration with the struggles of the oppressed needs to inform emancipatory theory building. Ethnography lends itself to this task. In contrast to other social science methodologies, the strength of ethnographers is to go beyond the analysis of structures by immersing themselves in the lifeworlds of subjects to understand what phenomena mean to the people who have to live (in) them. This entails emotions, hopes, and despair from a first-person experience rather than as an abstraction. But ethnography has limits in terms of the aim not only to describe but also to transform the oppressive structures that evoke the very emotions which ethnography is so good at grasping. We therefore suggest an approach that asks not only "how it is" but also "how it could be." We propose critical ethnography as an empirical strategy to theorize unequal structures in collaboration with the oppressed – and to take their critical capacities as a starting point for formulating transformational knowledge. Critical ethnography centres the subjectivities of resistant groups. It analyses (a) structural conditions of oppression that inform/constrain their resistance, and (b) investigates how they imagine ways of living beyond structural oppressions, that is how they envisage social justice.

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[146] Koddenbrock, K. (2014). Strategies of Critique in International Relations: From Foucault and Latour towards Marx. *European Journal of International Relations* 21(2): 243–266. Schindler, S (2020). The Task of Critique in Times of Post-Truth Politics. *Review of International Studies*, 46 (3): 376–394.

[147] Horkheimer, M. ([1937] 2011). *Traditionelle und kritische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, pp. 205–261.

[148] Cox, R. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory, in: *Millennium* 10 (2), p. 127.

[149] Anderl, F., and Wallmeier, P. (2018): Modi der Kritik des internationalen Regierens. Ein Plädoyer für immanente Kritik. *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen*, 25 (1): 65–89.

[150] Allen, A (2017). *The End of Progress. Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Columbia University Press.

[151] Austin, J. L. (2019). Critique and Post-Critique. *Security Dialogue*, 50 (4S): 14–15.

Centring Subjectivities

Ethnography is broadly accepted as among the best methods for capturing the everyday: the life on the ground and what it means for people in specific contexts. Therefore, it is a good starting point for encountering the problem of critical theory's addiction to abstraction, and its lack of empirical grounding for making statements on the direction of progress. In other words, it can help democratize critical theory. Ethnography can make violence visible through the situatedness of its research and its reflexive positionality. If done well, it can unveil the "embodiment of history," but it often struggles to "render visible the social machinery of oppression" in a systematic way.[152] This is because without a historical-materialist interpretation of the "ethnographically visible," the reality of poverty, sickness, and exploitation are taken for granted and their legacies in slavery and neoliberal economic policies remain invisible.[153] But rather than making a methodological proposal for connecting "invisible structure" and "local context," we suggest that the unique opportunity of critical ethnography is to contribute to transformative theory-building informed by resistant subject positions, thus rendering formulations of "how it could be" visible. Critical ethnography can do that by reconstructing hopes, desires, and imaginaries of ways of living beyond structural oppression that are already prevalent in resistant communities. In that way, ethnographic approaches can contribute to critical theory in Horkheimer's sense of not only taking institutions and social power relations for granted but calling them into question – yet not from a God's view from nowhere, but anchored in the beliefs and imaginaries of resistant subjects.

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[152] Fassin, D. (2003). The embodiment of inequality: AIDS as a social condition and historical experience in South Africa. *EMBO Reports, Science and Society* 4: 4–9.

[153] Green, L. (2004). Comment on Paul Farmer's an Anthropology of Structural Violence, *Current Anthropology*, 45(3), p. 319. See also: Farmer, P (2004). An Anthropology of Structural Violence. *Current Anthropology*, 45(3): 303–325.

To reconstruct such imaginaries, they need to be contextualized in the subjectivities of people and how these are interwoven with the history of place. We illustrate this with transformational knowledges of quilombolan Black feminist activists of the island Ilha de Maré in Salvador de Bahia/Brazil and their fight against the destruction of their livelihoods by petroleum supply chains and structural neglect due to racialized capitalist production networks and disposal systems that sacrifice their lives for the development of others. Our example builds on initial findings of a research stay on site between May and August 2023 using participatory observation, group dialogues and semi-structured interviews while living with the local communities.[154] The research is placed in the tradition of feminist standpoint theory that points out the partiality and situatedness of knowledge and claims that research should begin with the lives of the most marginalized.[155] Additionally, they point out the importance of committing to a process of reflection on the power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships and the multiple dimensions of the researcher's location throughout the entirety of the research process. The awareness of the danger of reproducing the "coloniality of power"[156] as a white European researcher has been openly discussed with the members of the communities.

Ilha de Maré: Quilombolan Territory, Black Resistance and Anti-Colonial Continuities

Ilha de Maré is located in the north-western portion of the Todos os Santos Bay. Despite the distance, Ilha de Maré belongs to the city of Salvador, the capital of the state Bahia, Brazil. Salvador has been the largest and most important port for the trafficking of Africans on the transatlantic trade route. Most enslaved Africans who were forcibly transported to other regions of the Americas and Europe passed through the Bay of All Saints. The violent colonial history has shaped racial, gender and class relations to the present day, including, for example, current forms of distribution of labour, access to formal employment, and uneven urban development resulting in fragile public services such as transportation, housing and water.[157] As a city in which 77% of the population identifies as Black, Salvador is shaped by its vibrant African heritage with an omnipresence of Blackness, Black people and African symbolism in the public. Salvador and the Bahian state in general, are widely recognized as the African mecca of the Black diaspora and the centre of Afro-Brazilian culture and have greatly influenced the formation of a global Black identity.[158] Ilha de Maré, specifically, has the highest Black population in the city and one of the poorest Human Development Indices. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, the territory of Ilha de Maré was occupied by a profitable sugar economy based on slave labour.[159] Nowadays, the communities live off of artisanal fishery and family farming. The island consists of ten communities, six of which were recognized as Quilombos in accordance with the Brazilian constitution of 1988. Quilombos are settlements established by escaped enslaved Africans living there as free people, who had fled from sugar plantations in the region as well as those who remained after abolition. Those people imagined and practiced freedom on land that was not given to them, but that they claimed as their own.[160] Quilombos symbolize the historical Black struggle for "full freedom" in Brazil, but are often invisibilized and held in "spaces of silence" through structural oppression along intersectional axes of gender, class, and race, of which its inhabitants are often acutely aware. These "spaces of silence" are constructed through the banalization and erasure of people's realities not only in discursive ways but also in material spaces such as courtroom hearings, government offices and public meetings.[161]

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[154] The field research that we exemplarily draw on here was undertaken by Johanna Kocks.

[155] Harding, S. (2004). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader. Intellectual and Political Controversies*. Routledge; Mohanty, C. T. (2003). "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(2): 499–535.

[156] Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla: Views from South* 1(3): 533–580.

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[157] Perry, Keisha-Khan Y. (2013). *Black Women against the Land Grab. The Fight for Racial Justice in Brazil*. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 6ff.

[158] Perry (2013), p. 7.

[159] Rodin, P. (2021). Intersectionality in a Sacrifice Zone of Capital: The Experience of Black Women, Quilombolas and Gleaners, on Ilha de Maré, in Todos os Santos Bay (Bahia, Brazil). *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Urbanos e Regionais*, 23(1), p. 9.

[160] O'Dwyer, E.C. (2002). *Quilombos: Identidade, étnica e territorialidade*. Editora FGV; Perry (2013).

[161] Scanlan Lyons, C. M. (2011). Spaces of Silence and Efforts toward Voice: Negotiation and Power Among "Quilombo" Communities in Southern Bahia Brazil. *Afro-Hispanic Review* 30(2): 115–132.

Ilha de Maré, like the whole bay area, has undergone drastic economic change from the 1950s onwards with the discovery of oil and the establishment of the first petroleum supply chain in the country. Oil production in the onshore fields favoured setting up Landulpho Alves Refinery and other petrochemical complexes in the bay during the ensuing decades. Overall, Ilha de Maré is surrounded by intense industrial zones and the current scenario in the region can be described as one of occupation and appropriation: a lot of the industrial infrastructure directly shapes local landscapes and limits access to the coastline, which heavily impacts the life of the quilombolan communities and their artisanal fishery on which their livelihoods depend. Additionally, the petroleum supply chain causes ongoing chemical contamination and recurring environmental damage triggered by oil spillages, its derivatives and toxic chemical substances which the industry frame as accidents. That badly damages the community's health and poisoned fish leads to high cancer rates among women, children and the elderly. The division of labor on the island means that women are in close contact with the water. Additionally, the situation on the island is characterized by severe neglect, caused by and symbolized by a lack of investment in infrastructure and healthcare. Investments in roads to improve transport completely cut off parts of the community during the rainy season. The neglected infrastructure hinders young people from pursuing job opportunities and education elsewhere as getting off the island remains costly and time-consuming. Rodin has shown how, faced with this "disproportionate injunction of environmental damage, […] the fishing communities and quilombolas of the Recôncavo, particularly the women of Ilha de Maré, have recognized that not only their living territories, but also their bodies have been transformed into a large sacrifice zone of the hegemonic development model, based on an energy matrix centered on the use of fossil fuels."[162]

The quilombolan women have repeatedly denounced publicly that they have been subjected to environmental racism that is intertwined with other intersecting structural axes of oppression such as gender and class.[163] Rodin, in dialogue with the women on Ilha de Maré, has shown how the Quilombo women are subjected to a system of necropolitics all over Ilha de Maré – "a death policy that focuses on certain groups or entire populations based on the acceptability of taking life or being 'left to die', based on race and racism."[164]

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[162] Rodin (2021), p. 10.

[163] Veloso, L. (2019). O que gente vive na Ilha da Maré é racismo ambiental', denuncia Eliete Paraguassu Combate Racismo Ambiental. https://racismoambiental.net.br/2019/06/21/o-que-gente-vive-na-ilha-da-mare-e-racismo-ambiental-denuncia-eliete-paraguassu/ (last access 01 June 2023).

[164] Rodin (2021), p. 10.

In line with this, Zagatto and Souza proposed the concept of "environmental necropolitics," since the extractivist context installed at Ilha de Maré has been "forcing [the communities] to live together in a perversely sui generis way with the inexorable experience of death."[165] They are trapped in a sacrifice zone of extractive capitalism.

The resistance of the local quilombolan communities, led by Black women, is part of a larger movement that has developed in recent decades in Latin America. As Svampa shows, it is especially Black, indigenous and peasant women from traditional and peripheral urban communities that play leading roles in the struggles against extractivism and in defense of their territories and communities.[166] Deep hanging out with women of Ilha de Maré discloses the everyday association between the struggle for environmental justice and feminist, anti-racist struggles for social justice in an environment that is heavily impacted by continuities of colonial exploitative structures. This insight and the imaginaries of a just future are closely linked to a self-understanding as Quilombo and the awareness of the resistant genealogy of the local communities. As Eliete Paraguassu, one of the most well-known activists, states: "I come from an enslaved family of Ilha de Maré, like many others here. Before [we engaged in political activism], we were unaware of the many forms of racism."[167] On Ilha de Maré, the self-understanding as Quilombo led to a recognition of that continuously contested heritage and fostered resistance and struggles for transformation. The acknowledgement as Quilombo has been one of the many steps in the fight for their rights, as this guarantees territorial protection, access to land and fishing rights, therefore granting communal autonomy and self-determination. On a practical level, the quilombolan communities fight for accountability and compliance by the surrounding industries and the local municipalities. While their fight for social justice includes access to jobs, education systems and health care, it is connected to an understanding of environmental racism and against a current mode of progress formulated as development-based resource extraction. Eliete Paraguassu, for instance, has formulated a need for a different development model that centres on the well-being of communities and nature and that is not focused on profit.

The quilombolan communities understand social justice as a form of "progress" that furthers their collective well-being. The inhabitants construct themselves as a community that distributes and functions in a way that prioritizes communal well-being, taking care of the collective, strong relational ties, gaining the freedom to choose a way of living and not being forced to live a certain way due to poverty and neglect. Progress, then, is formulated as an imaginary of liberation that evolves around communal autonomy, development and justice. As young people of the Quilombo put it: "I want my friends to be able to choose the life they want to live here on the island. We don't see an alteration of our living conditions in a quick way. We don't know, if things will ever change. But we do not lose hope, we dream. By dreaming we construct our future [sonhando a gente constrói o futuro]."

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[165] Zagatto, B.P., and Souza, L.E.V. (2020). A necropolítica ambiental nos quilombos de Ilha de Maré, Bahia, Brasil. *Amazônica – Revista de Antropologia*, 12(1), p. 264.

[166] Svampa, M. (2019). *Neo-Extractivism in Latin America*. Cambridge University Press.

[167] Santana, F. (2019). Ilha de Maré é território quilombola e bairro mais negro de Salvador. *Jornal Correio*, 20 November 2019.

A Sense of Direction

One of the sturdiest criticisms of critical theory is its sense of direction. "Progress" and "development" have – for good reasons – become emotive terms in critical academic discussions. But the progress imagined by marginalized communities can serve as a starting point for preparing different futures, one of the core tasks of critical theory as we have introduced it here. By reconstructing these imaginaries and theorizing them in context, critical ethnography can substantialize a sense of direction by and for emancipatory movements, thereby contributing to the self-understanding and affirmation of their struggles. Critical ethnography can thereby not only add substance to concepts such as "progress," but it can be a potent tool for formulating and mobilising emancipatory struggles.

Notably, this is not the only valuable approach to critical theory or to critical ethnography. We argue that especially for communities facing the extractive violence of capitalism, it can be a building block for conceptualizing and supporting their grassroots resistance by contributing to the reflection and self-actualization of resistant groups. Therefore, we have used ethnographic research in a community in one of the sacrifice zones of transnational capital to illustrate this approach. Drawing on the case of Black feminist activists in the Quilombo of Ilha de Maré in Salvador de Bahia/Brazil and their fight against the destruction of biodiversity and their living conditions in the context of oil supply chains, critical ethnography can ask how they imagine freedom beyond oppression, and based thereon, analyse the structural conditions of oppression that constrain the actualization of these proto-theorized ways of living.

The critical ethnographer does not criticize based on preconceived standards. Critical ethnography can work towards a normative position developed out of the existing society, which points to both the potentials for change and helps to realize them.[168] It thereby contributes to the project of immanent critique which must give the standards of critique an objective foothold in pre-scientific practice.[169] Focusing on imaginaries of social justice ("sonhando a gente constrói o futuro") can be a productive angle for generating such a foothold. Since one of critical theory's main weaknesses has been to speak on behalf of the excluded, but without a clear idea of how to do so without being paternalistic, ethnography can make a significant contribution in this regard.

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168 Anderl and Wallmeier (2018). See also: Herzog, B. (2014). Was bedeutet immanente Kritik für die empirische Sozialforschung: Überlegungen zur Erschließung notwendiger Widersprüche, In: Romero, José M., ed., *Immanente Kritik heute: Grundlagen und Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Begriffs*, transcript, pp. 157–179.

169 Boltanski, L., Honneth, A., amd Celikates, R. (2014). Sociology of Critique or Critical Theory? Luc Boltanski and Axel Honneth in Conversation with Robin Celikates. In: S. Susen & B. Turner, eds., *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique'*. Anthem Press, pp. 561–590.

Ethnographic Research beyond the Field: A Critical Introspection towards Multifaceted Approaches to Ethnography

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When we train in ethnographic research, several ideals are made clear from the beginning. We learn about openness towards what differs from our background, about holistic research and thick description, and we start to understand how our presence influences the field. Traditional ethnography is still regularly heralded as the epitome of research during which the typically white, male researcher goes to a village in the Global South and stays there for years at a time. But, of course, plenty has happened since Malinowski and Boas. Particularly postcolonial critiques of ethnography have led to a paradigm shift within anthropology. Compared to many other disciplines, there has been a surprising amount of critical self-assessment within socio-cultural anthropology and an honest and critical reflection on the discipline's colonial past is very prominent.[170] That is not to say that anthropology has managed to decolonise itself, far from it, but it has taken some significant steps.

On the other hand, some paradigms of ethnographic research seem to have been barely effected by this critique and particularly the rising popularity of ethnographic research in disciplines that adapt the method without the history risks further delinking ethnography and critique. The entrenched concept that I challenge is what I would like to call the *myth of fieldwork*. It is the myth of the courageous explorer, who enters the dangerous, mysterious and all-together different part of the field where, under great peril and with no regard for his own safety, he extracts a deep understanding of the incomprehensible.[171] In the following, I would thus like to address this mystifying narrative of the researcher and then add a brief, critical reflection on the conception of the field and how those traditional, meaning well-established and largely uncontested, approaches limit the scope of ethnography. After that, I will address remote and hybrid approaches to fieldwork and make a case for their validity as ethnographic research in addition to the established long term physical presence in a setting. Those approaches, as proposed in this text, stand in a tradition of feminist and postcolonial critique towards ethnography and aim towards embodying a more inclusive practice in research as well as a more diverse perspective in the field.

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[170] Oswald, M. von, and Tinius, J., eds. (2020). *Across Anthropology*. Leuven University Press; Pels, P. (2008). What Has Anthropology Learned from the Anthropology of Colonialism? *Social Anthropology* 16(3): 280–299.

[171] Routley, L., and Wright, K. A. M. (2021). Being Indiana Jones in IR. In: R. Mac Ginty, R. L. Brett, and B. Vogel, eds., *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, Springer International Publishing, pp. 85–100; Driscoll, J., and Schuster, C. (2018). Spies Like Us. *Ethnography* 19(3): 411–430.

Ethnographic Myths: Fieldwork and Field

Researchers' heroics in the field are a narrative many of us have encountered in ways similar to what Laura Routley and Katharine A. M. Wright describe: "In their most blatant form, these performances are evidenced in conference discussions and conversations over coffee or dinner in which the academic seeks to portray himself as a version of Indiana Jones."[172] But while this might be annoying at a conference or maybe even frustrating in terms of the academic recognition it receives, the ingrained underlying attitude towards fieldwork is more worrisome. There is both a patriarchal and a colonial hegemony to this understanding of ethnographic research, with the former describing the dimension of hypermasculinity and patriarchal power of understanding the researcher as a courageous adventurer while the latter emphasises the racialised hierarchy and othering of research subjects from the Global South.[173]

Yet, the myth stretches beyond the figure of the researcher and entails how the field and fieldwork are imagined. The postcolonial critique, raised as early as the 1970s, has created maybe the first attempt at critical ethnography in the sense of positioning itself against hegemony and begins with the question of where the field is. For a long time, it was clearly situated in the colonies and the researcher went there as an explorer of the other, who brought back exoticized interpretations that were meant to be interpreted as supposedly fundamentally different ideas within a Eurocentric context.[174] The decolonisation process that anthropology underwent not only problematised the paradigms of ethnographic research, but also shifted the understanding of the field in various directions. In the 1990s, postmodern scholars had gone so far as to completely denounce the field and the practice of fieldwork as unsalvageable in its colonial nature and thus called for its abolition.[175]

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[172] Routley, L., and Wright, K. A. M, (2021).

[173] Driscoll, J., and Schuster, C. Spies Like Us: 411–430.

[174] Asad, T. (1998). Introduction. In: T. Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, Humanity Books, pp. 9–19.

While most ethnographers have not heeded these calls, the discourse changed the field significantly. For one, it became a valid option to do ethnographic research in the Global North. It became acceptable for researchers from the Global North and South to do research in their own communities and the field no longer needed to be situated around so-called pre-industrialised or clearly distinguishable communities[176] but also included studying up[177] as organisational ethnography does.

Approaches like global or multi-sited ethnography even rejected the understanding of the field as a physical space altogether and replaced it with concepts or people which researchers followed to different places around the globe.[178] More recently, digital ethnographers have defined fields in online spaces that have no equivalent in the non-virtual world.[179] By negating the field as a physical space, these approaches uncover how the field has always been a construction of the ethnographer's interpretation and personal situatedness.[180] Thus, ethnographies from blended, alternative, multi-sited and even those without a field are gaining traction at the moment,[181] thereby opening up space for more radical debates on how critical ethnography can be carried out in the future.

However, when we abandon those traditional takes, this leads to the question of the essence of ethnography and when a project deserves to be called ethnographic. The above-mentioned approaches, and to an even larger degree the approaches discussed in the next section, cannot rely on participant observation to the extend that traditional ethnography can. When the field is no longer a clearly bounded physical space, being there becomes a challenge. This in turn, leads to writing fewer vignettes, though they are also criticised as an easy tool for concealing a lack of analytical profundity,[182] and falling short of the gold standard of thick description which implies that the goal is a holistic interpretation and description. However, when we take our positionality seriously in terms of the people we talk to, what we hear and how we understand, this challenges (the possibility of) the holistic ambition. We must acknowledge that in-person fieldwork tends to depend on a small group of informants and their perspectives as well. Yet, we seem to still strive for more far-reaching interpretations. This is explained by what John Postill has described as anthropology's core concern namely "of missing out."[183] The worry is that by not being there in the way traditional ethnography suggests, one might miss some of the experiences one might have had otherwise.[184] And it is undoubtedly true that by not being there in the traditional sense, one will not have the same experience. This can, however, only be considered a problem by clinging to the notion of a supposedly holistic perspective through field research and to equating events in the physical field with the only kind of real or valuable (inter)action. If we instead acknowledge how our positionality and our choices will always give us a specific and thus limited perspective, we will be able to appreciate that a different approach to ethnography is not flawed, but is merely an alternative – nothing less, just something different. Critical research needs to be open to varied narrations and to understanding such different ethnographies as adding to each other. This will serve to create a more complex notion of individual research contexts.

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[175] Berger, R. A. (1993). From Text to (Field)Work and Back Again: Theorizing a Post(Modern)-Ethnography. *Anthropological Quarterly* 66(4): 174–186.

[176] Sluka, J. A., and Robben, A. C. G. M. (2007). Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology. In: A. C. G. M. Robben, and J. A. Sluka, eds., *Ethnographic Fieldwork*, Blackwell, pp. 1–28.

[177] Nader, L. (1972). Up the Anthropologist. In: D. Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology*, Pantheon Books, pp. 284–311.

[178] Marcus, G. E. (2011). Multi-Sited Ethnography. In: S. Coleman, and P. v. Hellermann, eds., *Multi-sited ethnography*, Routledge, pp. 16–32.; Burawoy, M. (2003). Revisits: An Outline of a Theory of Reflexive Ethnography. *American Sociological Review* 68(5): 645–679.

[179] Frömming, U. U., et al. (2017). Digital Environments and the Future of Ethnography. An Introduction. In: U. U. Frömming, et al., eds., *Digital Environments*, transcript; Pink, S. (2021). Digital Futures Anthropology. In: H. Geismar, and H. Knox, eds., *Digital Anthropology*, Routledge, pp. 307–324.

[180] Riccio, B. (2011). Exploring Senegalese Translocal Spaces. In: S. Coleman, and P. v. Hellermann, eds., *Multi-sited ethnography*, Routledge, pp. 74–86.

[181] Eggeling, K. A. (2023). Embracing the "Inverted commas," or How COVID-19 can show us new directions for ethnographic "fieldwork." *Qualitative Research* 23(5): 1342–1358.

This awareness will allow us to move beyond an understanding of ethnography that is purely focused on one methodological approach and towards a more open epistemological contemplation. Tom Boellstorff describes the core of ethnography when discussing the status of digital ethnography. He emphasises that ethnographic research needs to include "what people say they do and what they do."[185] In doing so, research can go beyond what participants can or want to articulate into the things taken for granted, actions that are done unconsciously and automatically or towards what is more felt than thought. This allows for interpretations of silence and the unspeakable. Participant observations and long stays in the field are certainly a good way of accessing this kind of knowledge.[186] Yet, as the next section shows, it is not the only one: there are situations in which the conditions of the field, the researcher's situation or the context of the project do not make in-person ethnography the most feasible approach. Nonetheless, according to the just defined standard of going beyond the said, the project can confidently be called an ethnography by creating "deep, contextual and contingent understandings."[187]

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[182] Burawoy (2003), pp. 645–679.

[183] Postill, J. (2017). Remote Ethnography. In: L. Hjorth, et al., eds., *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*, Routledge, pp. 61–69.

[184] Postill (2017).

[185] Boellstorff, T. (2021). Rethinking Digital Anthropology. In: H. Geismar, and H. Knox, eds., *Digital Anthropology*, Routledge, pp. 44–62.

Variations of Ethnographic Research

The myth of the ethnographer is one way of keeping people out of the field. But the current practice of ethnography has the same effect. The neo-liberalisation of working conditions in academia has changed the ethnographic practice as few researchers have the funding or job structure to go to the field for years, or even months on end.[188] Additionally, particularly women and people with non-academic family backgrounds tend to be more involved with caring responsibilities and other commitments outside of academia that prevent them from staying away for long periods.[189] For women, people of colour, queer researchers and academics with disabilities or medical conditions, in-person field research can be dangerous or simply unfeasible in many settings.[190] So, to allow ethnography to grow beyond traditional research is not only a matter of practicality but it is also one of inclusivity and will significantly help diversify the field. To gain a more complex and multifaceted understanding of the field, we need more diverse researchers to be involved and that means diversifying the research recognised.[191] Following the definition of the core of ethnographic research in the previous section, there is no scientific reason not to branch out into different ways of doing ethnography.

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186 Boellstorff (2021).

187 Postill, J., and Pink, S. (2012). Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web. *Media International Australia* 145(1): 123–134.

188 Aqil, N., Petrich, K., and Gundur, R. V. (2023). Leveraging Identity to Overcome Temporal and Financial Limitations in Rapid Ethnography in Criminological Research. *Journal of Criminology*: 1–24.

189 Bastia, T., et al. (2022). Navigating the Challenges of Fieldwork and Childcare: Revisiting "Muddy Glee." *Area* 54(4): 569–573.

190 Günel, G., Varma, S., and Watanabe, C. (2020). A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography.

191 Sluka, J. A., and Robben, A. C. G. M. Fieldwork in Cultural Anthropology.; Routley, L., and Wright, K. A. M. Being Indiana Jones in IR.

That said, most of the approaches to be discussed are not even new. Instead, they have been used by ethnographers in different circumstances over the last century. Yet, they have usually been treated as a second-best option in cases of traditional ethnography being unfeasible.[192] The COVID-19 pandemic has shown very clearly how quickly that arises, how adaptation might be necessary and ethnographers still produce research up to par.[193]

Remote research has been a way to avoid dangerous or suddenly closed fields for a long time. It allows researchers to access or contact people without being physically present. Where remote field access has been a struggle for many decades and limited by what could be done remotely, modern technologies of communication have fundamentally changed the game. People in large parts of the planet can be contacted virtually. There is a significant amount of access to information online, to be understood as artefacts or testimonials. Social media even allows for live access to otherwise potentially inaccessible contexts and workshops can be held with people living on different continents.[194] Remote approaches have been typically implemented at short notice and in exceptional situations. So who can say what else they could achieve when used as a method of choice and with all the careful planning that goes into a field visit. Additionally, a remote approach allows for research with participants that are difficult to reach or in settings where the presence of the researcher might be harmful to the participant. As these issues typically occur with marginalised participants, it is hence another dimension of diversifying research.

A logical continuation of that thought is to consider hybrid research formats which have been little conceptualised so far. This would keep the qualities of physically experiencing the field, but in combination with remote methods.[195] This option requires more confidence in the remote as the researcher will not spend as much time physically in the field as in traditional approaches. Short field visits have the bad reputation of "parachute ethnography" that is extractivist, ill-informed and non-consequential.[196] Yet, they can also be respectful, collaborative and even activist, if they are undertaken with the right mindset and if the collaboration does not end with the physical exit from the field. Thus, hybrid research can allow for responsible and engaged research within the constraints of academia. It certainly calls for more creative and diverse approaches to research that need to be adapted to the specific situations. Yet, feminist and decolonial methodologies have much to offer in this respect. And triangulating methods and texts are actually an important ethnographic practice, and it will be an enriching process to further diversify the ethnographic methodological portfolio.[197]

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[192] Postill (2017).

[193] Ghosh, B. (2020). Digital Ethnography During the COVID 19 Pandemic.; Krause, P., et al. (2021). COVID-19 and Fieldwork: Challenges and Solutions. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 54(2): 264–269.

[194] Gray, P. A. (2016). Memory, Body, and the Online Researcher. *American Ethnologist* 43(3): 500–510.; Postill (2017).

[195] Günel, Varma, and Watanabe (2020).

[196] Aqil, Petrich, and Gundur (2023).

The process will not always be easy. Things might be harder to grasp, if any stay is brief. In my experience, remote communication comes with difficulties of its own, tends to need a lot of proactive engagement from the ethnographer and ethnographies will read differently. But there are additional advantages to remote and hybrid research. The most important one might be that it changes the relationship between researcher and participant. While rapport might take even more effort, there is much more space for agency. Participants are better able to take control and make choices about how, when and where to let the researcher participate. I was definitely given firmer boundaries in remote projects and participants could first discuss my potential role among themselves. And while this might lead to us not experiencing things we could have encountered in person, participants might also give us different access and emphasise their position and agency as well as their limits of cooperation.

Towards More Diverse Ethnographic Research

Gatekeeping is a problem in research. Many disciplines struggle to even come close to achieving gender equality between only two genders in terms of tenured positions. Faculty of colour or a working class background is still the exception in many places. When those and further dimensions of discrimination intersect, we are left with the rather homogenous group that dominates academia at the moment. This is not only an ethical problem in itself, but has also significant scientific and epistemological consequences. The person of the researcher affects the kind of rapport that can be established in the first place. Furthermore, the researcher has the power to decide which perspectives from the field are heard and their decision is, in turn, informed by their positionality. Thus, a more inclusive methodology that diversifies ethnographers will in turn diversify perspectives portrayed in ethnographic writings.

Yet, I also argue that new approaches to ethnography are valid in their own right. The resistance to them stems more from antiquated ideas of holistic research and a self-congratulatory myth around the adventure of fieldwork than from methodological concerns. This is not to say that hybrid or even remote ethnographies should replace in-person fieldwork. There are ethnographies that could never be carried out in a remote setting for reasons such as a lack of access to technology or specific sensitivities of the topic. On the other hand, certain projects involving vulnerable or hard to access communities might work even better remotely. And remote projects hold the potential for empowerment precisely through the physical absence of the researcher. That is to say that the complexities of research in our highly connected and mobile world require different approaches to different projects, depending on who is researching and who is being researched. Remote and hybrid ethnographies can be a valuable addition to in-person fieldwork, if we allow it. Such changes to how we approach ethnographic research might seem of little importance. Yet they are seen in the context of a larger debate on epistemic violence and the decolonisation of knowledge. To diversify the way we research means telling stories that differ from the ones we have grown accustomed to, to build a more inclusive university and as a consequence build both, new epistemologies and new ontologies.

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[197] Postill (2017).

This essay thus calls for an openness within anthropology and other disciplines using ethnography towards more diverse approaches to ethnographic research and towards innovative and exploratory ethnographic projects. Such an ethnography is necessarily critical in that it understands power dynamics within scientific traditions and in the field and addresses them by taking stances against hegemony from various perspectives against racialised, gendered or other discriminatory practices. Changing the way we do fieldwork is thus at the same time a political and an academic project and both are inseparable.

Ethnography as Weapon

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The idea for this short text started to take shape when Katarina Kušić asked during our workshop *Critical Ethnography* in November 2022: "What and whom do our ethnographies serve?" I couldn't stop thinking about this question and what it entails for our ethnographic research practice, the conceptions of critique we are working with, and our role(s) and responsibilities as critical ethnographers. Who are we writing these ethnographies for? What sort of critique do they offer, to whom, and at whose service?[198] I argue in this text that one of the biggest critical potentials of ethnography unfolds when it is weaponized to "study up" to those in power and/or those who sustain power asymmetries, and I will illustrate this argument with two prominent research fields: ethnographies of the police, and ethnographies of the far right.

As (not only) the contributions in this forum demonstrate, many critical ethnographers choose to side and work with marginalized populations and those suffering (and resisting) the effects of hegemonic power and violence, or with activists who aim to transform dominant power relations, exploitation and inequality. The potential for critique in such research can be qualified as affirmative, if, for instance, ethnography amplifies marginalized voices and provides a space for emancipatory knowledge.[199] It can also be qualified as creative, if ethnography is able to engineer "imaginations and idioms for different futures, mindful of how very hard it is to think outside and beyond what we know presently."[200] In many collaborative and political activist ethnographic projects, researchers are embedded in marginalized and/or activist communities whose politics they (want to) support. While these are important ways of doing and practising critique, with this piece, I want to examine a complementary mode that opens up new possibilities for critique.

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[198] See Kušić, K. in this Forum. I would also like to thank Katarina Kušić and Andreas Streinzer for their generous feedback on this text.

[199] Madison, D. S. (2012). *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Sage, pp. 6ff.; cf. Biehl, J., and McKay, R. (2012). Ethnography as Political Critique. *Anthropological Quarterly 85*(4): 1216f.

[200] Fortun, K. (2012). Ethnography in Late Industrialism. *Cultural Anthropology*, *27*(3): 459.

I want to explore the notion of strategic ethnographic practice of critique that focusses not on those suffering (and/or resisting) the effects of inequality, oppression, and hegemonic systems of power and domination, but on those apparatuses that produce, stabilise, and perpetuate these systems of power. I propose a strategic practice of critique to produce useful knowledge in political struggles against inequality and oppression – in other words: I propose to *weaponize* ethnographic research. I am borrowing the term "weaponization" from Louis Althusser's interview with L'Unit in 1968 in which he explained that he saw Marxist theory as a weapon in political struggles, and emphasized the usefulness of Marxist critique for the workers' movement.[201] Similarly to the philosopher's understanding, by *weaponizing ethnographic research* I mean the objective of putting to use our time, resources, privileges, our skills and intellect, our education and training, to direct it toward the study of system(atic)s of power and to produce "dangerous knowledge"[202] that can be useful in emancipatory struggles to potentially upset and unsettle hegemonic apparatuses. Ethnography as a weapon aims to reveal, dispose and demystify the workings of power. Its critical potential can thus be qualified as destructive.

The understanding of a weaponization of ethnography against systems and structures of power I want to facilitate here is rooted in two prominent sources of inspiration, that is, the work of Dorothy E. Smith and Laura Nader. On the one hand, Dorothy E. Smith's concept of institutional ethnography proposed a radical change in perspective for ethnographic studies in the 1980s. Instead of immersing oneself into another culture and studying people who are different from "us," Smith suggested focussing the ethnographic gaze on "ruling apparatuses" in our "own" societies, "including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power."[203] In line with feminist Marxist critique, Smith argued that studying institutions and relations of power would be an apt tool for the women's movement because it would give the oppressed the knowledge to understand how their oppression is socially organised and institutionalised. On the other hand, Laura Nader introduced the concept of "studying up power" in the 1960s. By "studying up," Nader suggested "reinventing" the discipline, and studying "the colonizers rather than the colonized, the culture of power rather than the culture of the powerless, the culture of affluence rather than the culture of poverty."[204]

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[201] English translation: Althusser, L. (1970). Philosophy as a Revolutionary Weapon. *New Left Review 64*(1): 1–7. Online: https://newleftreview.org/issues/i64/articles/louis-althusser-philosophy-as-a-revolutionary-weapon.

[202] Kincheloe, J. L., & McLaren, P. (2011). Rethinking Critical Theory and Qualitative Research. In Hayes, K., Steinberg, S. R., & Tobin, K., eds., *Key Works in Critical Pedagogy.* Brill, p. 286.

[203] Smith, D. E. (1987). *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Northeastern University Press, p. 3; see also Smith, D. E. (1999). *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory, and Investigations*. University of Toronto Press; Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional Ehnography: A Sociology for People*. AltaMira Press.

Since then, critical ethnographers have tended to a variety of sites to shed light on the workings and systems of power, including fields of coloniality,[205] racism, whiteness, and white supremacy,[206] deportation regimes and organisations,[207] exploitative companies and extractive industries,[208] the World Bank,[209] Wall Street,[210] the slaughterhouse,[211] and many more. A lot of this work also shows that "studying up" and "studying down" is no longer an either-or-question, as many studies productively combine the study of precarity and marginalization with the study of its fabrication from above. In the following, I will highlight two sites of "weaponizing ethnography" that have inspired my own work – ethnographies of the police, and ethnographies of the far (and near) right – as exemplary fields in which to ground our critique.

Ethnographies of the Police

Recurring cases of police brutality, violence, and murder in the US reignited the Black Lives Matter movement in 2021 and have also been a factor in renewed scholarly critique of racialized policing of Black people in the US, that start, as Jodi Rios put it in her book about policing blackness in the US, with "experiencing traffic stops for every possible vehicular and driving infraction," and being "policed for the number of people around their barbecues, the types of music they listen to, the coordination of their curtains, the way they wear their pants, where they play basketball, how they paint their back doors, where their children leave their toys, who spends the night at their houses, who parks a car in their driveways, and how they use their front porches."[212] Rios has shown that these low-level infractions are far from trivial, but have been added to the entrapment of the Black community in a vicious circle of discriminatory over-policing for decades.

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[204] Nader, L. (1972) Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up. In: Hymes, D. ed., *Reinventing Anthropology*. Pantheon Books, p. 289.

[205] Stoler, A. L. (2016). *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Duke University Press.

[206] Vaught, S. E. (2011). *Racism, Public Schooling, and the Entrenchment of White Supremacy: A Critical Race Ethnography*. State University of New York Press; Klinkert, V. L. (2021). Humbling Anthropology: *Ego reflexivus* and White ignorance. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 11(1): 309–318.

[207] Wissink, L. M. (2021). Making Populations for Deportation: Bureaucratic Knowledge Practices Inside a European Deportation Unit. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *44*(2): 256–270; Kasparek, B. (2021). *Europa als Grenze: Eine Ethnographie der Grenzschutz-Agentur Frontex*. transcript Verlag.

[208] Tsing, A. L. (2005). *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton University Press; Andrijasevic, R., & Sacchetto, D. (2017). "Disappearing Workers": Foxconn in Europe and the Changing Role of Temporary Work Agencies. *Work, Employment and Society*, *31*(1): 54–70.

[209] Anderl, F. (2022). *Broken Solidarities: How Open Global Governance Divides and Rules*. Bristol University Press.

[210] Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

[211] Pachirat, T. (2011). *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. Yale University Press.

Ethnographic work that focusses on unravelling the inner workings of the police institution, for instance, the systematic (re)production of anti-Blackness, racism, and other forms of bias in the everyday work of police officers, their (re)production of oppressive social orders, or their use of excessive force and violence against marginalized populations has a critical, unsettling potential. Didier Fassin, for instance, has written that his audiences were often unsettled by the banality and ordinariness of discrimination and violence that signifies police work and that was not "restricted to brutality but had to include other forms I designated as moral, such as humiliation, vexation, debasing comment and racist insult."[213] It is our role as critical ethnographers, Fassin argues, to continuously politicise and publicise our knowledge of what policing entails and how it works. The police are, after all, a public institution "invested with meaning and legitimized by various publics," which emphasizes the ethnographer's responsibility to communicate her findings to the public(s).[214]

Ethnographic scrutiny can be useful in the field of policing for documenting episodes of police brutality and exposing the violence of racialised policing, and can further reveal the profound and long-term effects on minorities, the "slow violence" of policing blackness and immigration, to quote Vanessa Thompson,[215] and the "ordinariness" of police discrimination, as Fassin has termed it, that usually remains out of sight, but that is just as effective in reproducing the racialised hierarchies common in white supremacist social orders.

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[212] Rios, J. (2020). *Black Lives and Spatial Matters: Policing Blackness and Practicing Freedom in Suburban St. Louis*. Cornell University Press, p. 15.

[213] Fassin, D. (2013). Why Ethnography Matters: On Anthropology and Its Publics. *Cultural Anthropology*, *28*(4): 621–646.

[214] Mutsaers, P., Simpson, J., and Karpiak, K. (2015). The Anthropology of Police as Public Anthropology. *American Anthropologist 117*(4): 786.

[215] Thompson, V. E. (2022). Policing Blackness in Europe: Colonial Entanglements and Contemporary Articulations of Struggle. *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online*, *19*(1): 27–48.

A large portion of the citizenry, in all parts of the world, suffer the effects of institutional racism and unceasing over-policing, as shown by a vast and growing body of ethnographic studies.[216] Independent ethnographic research on policing practices that undermine the lives of many communities has the potential to challenge not only predominant ideas of the police among academic audiences, but the police institution as such. Critical researchers in this field have a responsibility to inform public debates and social movements that aim to transform, democratize, defund and/or abolish the police.[217] Yet, in this case, answering Howard Becker's famous question "Whose side are we on?" with "Siding *against* the police" also comes with a set of challenging implications for our research practice, ethics, access, and the navigation of ambiguous relationships inside and outside our fieldwork that need to be considered carefully.[218]

Ethnographies of the Far (and Near) Right

The rise of the right has been and will continue to be a concern for ethnographic researchers, although, as Sindre Bangstad among others has pointed out, there is a conspicuous "paucity of such ethnographic studies" that might have something to do with the tendency of political ethnographers to "focus on the proverbial 'people we like.'"[219] Notable exceptions to that paucity are, among others, Agnieszka Pasieka's and Maddalena Gretel Cammelli's work on Italian fascist movements,[220] Hilary Pilkington's work on the English Defence League in the UK,[221] and Kathleen Blee's on the Ku Klux Klan in the US.[222]

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[216] E.g., Beek, J., Bierschenk, T., Kolloch, A. E., & Meyer, B. (Eds.). (2023). *Policing Race, Ethnicity and Culture: Ethnographic Perspectives across Europe*. Manchester University Press; Gordon, D. (2022). *Policing the Racial Divide: Urban Growth Politics and the Remaking of Segregation*. New York University Press; Feldman, G. (2018). *The Gray Zone: Sovereignty, Human Smuggling, and Undercover Police Investigation in Europe*. Stanford University Press; Epp, C. R., D. P. Haider-Markel, and S. Maynard-Moody. (2014). *Pulled Over: How Police Stops Define Race and Citizenship*. The University of Chicago Press; Fassin, D. (2013). *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing*. Polity Press; Leser, J. (2020). The Category of "Culture" in Vice Squad Policing in Germany. *Sociologus* 70(1): 57–73; Mutsaers, P. (2019). *Police Unlimited: Policing, Migrants, and the Values of Bureaucracy*. Oxford University Press.

[217] Vitale, A. S. (2017). *The End of Policing*. Verso.

[218] Jauregui, B. (2023). Police Ethnography, Extraction, and Abolition. In: Fleming, J., and Charman, S. (Eds.). *Routledge International Handbook of Police Ethnography*. Routledge, pp. 353–372.

[219] Bangstad, S. (2021). Anthropologies of the Far-right and the Anthropology of Critique. *Social Anthropology*, 29(2): 339.

Ethnographic work on far-right and racist politics and activism has the potential to unravel their ambivalences and intersections, move beyond academic attempts of distancing and locating racist and exclusionary politics on the fringes of society, and beyond simplifications and moral binaries.[223] What many of these studies expose is the pervasive normalisation of the right, the "creeping" everyday racism,[224] and the range of "complicity" and "implicated subjectivity" beyond the extreme.[225] In other words, studying the far right with the tools that ethnography provides us often reveals that the *far* right is actually *nearer* than most of us (still) assume. Ethnographies of racist and far-right politics can reveal why and how far-right mobilisation is so successful across the globe, what makes these politics attractive, and how racism is increasingly normalised.

A critical ethnography of the far and near right can add nuance to the often-prototypical depiction of far-right politics and should also include the researcher's responsibility to draw responsible conclusions. In the words of Nitzan Shoshan, critical ethnographers need to "develop concepts that, rather than entailing a separation between the extreme and the mainstream, will help us find the former as already in the latter, as emerging from it and rooted in it."[226] To which I would add, that we also need to consider the potential of our research to shift the public discussions away from settling on monocausal explanations for the rise of the right, and the usefulness of the knowledge we produce in these fields for anti-fascist and anti-racist struggles and engagement.

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[220] Pasieka, A. (2022). "Tomorrow Belongs to Us": Pathways to Activism in Italian Far-Right Youth Communities. *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 64(1): 150–178; Gretel Cammelli, M. (2018). The Legacy of Fascism in the Present: "Third Millennium Fascists" in Italy. *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 23(2): 199–214.

[221] Pilkington, H. (2016). *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League*. Manchester University Press.

[222] Blee, K. M. (2018). *Understanding Racist Activism: Theory, Methods and Research*. Routledge.

[223] Leser, J., & Spissinger, F. (2020). The Functionality of Affects: Conceptualising Far-right Populist Politics beyond Negative Emotions. *Global Discourse*, 10(2): 325–342.

[224] De Cesari, C. (2021). Creeping Racism: A Cultural Conception of Politics. *Social Anthropology*, 29(2): 342–344.

[225] Rothberg, M. (2019). *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford University Press.

[226] Shoshan, N. in Bangstad, S., Bertelsen, B. E., & Henkel, H. (2019). The Politics of Affect: Perspectives on the Rise of the Far-right and Right-wing Populism in the West. *Focaal*, 83: 103.

Again, as is the case for police research, the field of far-right politics is often framed as “repugnant” and “unlikeable.” Here, ethnographers put themselves in the very proximity of the movements and people whose politics they do not support, and this surely is uncomfortable, ethically ambiguous, and potentially dangerous. But, as Hilary Pilkington has put it, prioritizing our own ethical comfort is not an active political position, but a form of dejection.[227] Within the boundaries of ensuring the researchers’ safety and well-being, seeking to understand the politics of those we do not support holds promising potential for ethnographic criticality.

How Not to Be Governed

The origins of ethnography lie in colonialism. It used to be an administrative, governmental, and essentially political practice. Ethnography was used “in empires’ needs to manage far-flung and distant outposts – colonial ones, to be sure, with all the paternalism and ‘Orientalism’ […] and racism […] they entailed.”[228] Today, ethnography is still a political practice, and can still be entangled with maintaining and/or legitimising (institutional) structures of oppression. But, among many others, Laura Nader and Dorothy M. Smith have come out in favour of using ethnography as a tool to criticise, and direct it toward those apparatuses that govern, essentially to learn how not to be governed. And as we know from Michel Foucault, the question “How not to be governed?” holds the core of critique.

In this contribution, I probed the potentials of weaponizing ethnography to unravel the workings of power in these times of crises. We can use it to make sense of the rise of the right, of racialised policing – as I have outlined in this text – but also other fields and sites where we find sources and relations of oppression and inequality. Ethnography can be a useful tool for working towards (or in supporting the work toward) a political horizon. By weaponization I want to emphasize the *aim* of ethnographic practice: For whom are we producing our ethnographies? Who and what are we supporting? What kind of knowledge can we provide and make useful, for whom, and for what purpose?

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[227] Pilkington, H. (2023). English Defence League. Probleme und Potenziale der Ethnografie rechter Bewegungen. In: S. Wellgraf, and C. Hentschel, eds., *Rechtspopulism der Gegenwart. Kulturwissenschaftliche Irritationen*. Spector Books, p. 101.

[228] Yanow, D. (2009). Organizational Ethnography and Methodological Angst: Myths and Challenges in the Field. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 4(2): 186–199.

Weaponizing ethnography is challenging. It asks us to articulate an answer to the question of whose side we are on, and exposing structures and systems of power implies lots of work. But with the possibility of change on the horizon, we might just as well arm ourselves with our critical ethnographic sensibilities and get going.

Doubly Destabilizing Definitions by Doing Ethnographic "Concept Work"

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It is a privilege to conclude this forum on *critical* ethnography. The interdisciplinary contributions emanate energy and enthusiasm about mobilizing ethnography "to push the boundaries of existing knowledge" when it operates "as impediment to a good life" – that is, to do critical research as conventionally understood.[229] In this short outro, I contextualize this embrace of ethnography to underscore its doubly destabilizing effects. Focussing specifically on the implications for the definitions – or concepts – through which we work with knowledge, I will argue first that the embrace of critical ethnography destabilizes conventional modes of research in the International Social Sciences (ISS[230]) by shifting the view of definitions. Critical ethnography locates them at the end rather than at the beginning of the research process of knowledge production. It turns scholarly inquiry into a process of ethnographically probing the limits of categories. Research becomes "concept work" rendering the political workings of "mobile," relational and shapeshifting concepts their due.[231] Ethnography is a promised land: a territory where one does not have to start from the "life-robbing jargon" of a home discipline.[232] International Relations (IR) will illustrate this argument for the simple reason that while Ethnography serves as a territory of asylum for critical scholars escaping the stifling disciplining of their disciplines across the ISS, the precise routes and images of the promised land vary. Independently of how they connect to Ethnography, the critical inroads of ISS are disturbing modes of knowledge production there. This is my second argument. As enthusiastic ISS refugees reach Ethnography and settle in, they discover that unsurprisingly, and as most territories, Ethnography is strictly policed and fraught with divisive turf-wars. While the import of locating and discovering definitions through the research process is uncontested, the question of how this can be achieved is a (or *the*) core stake in Ethnography disputes. A foundational "myth" about fieldwork[233] connects an archipelago of competing, contradictory fieldwork fetishes. Carving out space for critical "concept work" therefore is arduous for ISS scholars approaching Ethnography. It requires forming alliances and finding ways of collaborating with locals who share a commitment to critical ethnographies problematizing definitions. The result is a web of work running across critical ISS and critical Ethnography that is doubly destabilizing: it disturbs the organizing power of definitions in IR *as well as* the magic of fieldwork fetishes in Ethnography. This contribution traces this doubly destabilizing effect on definitions following ISS scholars to the promised land of Ethnography and their collaborations and alliances in the ethnographic archipelago.

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[229] Honneth, A. (2007). *Pathologien Der Vernunft. Geschichte Und Gegenwart Der Kritischen Theorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 28, 31.

[230] This phrasing is helpful as it does away disciplinary divisions in the social sciences where scholarly practice is increasingly "transdisciplinary" (as are the contributions to this forum) and has gained currency precisely for this reason as is most obvious in the title of the journal PARISS: *Political Anthropological Research on the International Social Sciences* (Beerli et al., 2020).

[231] E.g., Stoler, A. L. (2010). *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense.* Princeton University Press, p. 206.

[232] Eggeling, this Forum.

The Promised Land of Ethnography

"Define your terms young woman" is the battle cry of the many who defend a more rigorous and scholarly-sound version of ISS. It embellishes the instructions to students, who wish to join the community, as well as the reviews and reports disciplining those already in it. This call resonates in different ways across sociology, law, economics, or IR that will illustrate the argument here. In IR, the slightly odd fixation on definitions must be understood in the context of a discipline that until recently saw itself as primarily "practical."[234] It was practitioner's language that cultivated sensibility and intuition in excess formalized grammar and words. As such, there could "be no international relations theory."[235] As IR became established as a distinct academic field, practice continued to prime. Kissinger came to epitomize the ideal scholar. A prolific writer *cum* policy advisor, he straddled the two worlds of academia and diplomatic practice. He was emulated across the world. A "Machiavelli complex" held the IR in a firm grip. At the same time, academia also made its demands. There were calls for fixed signposts demarcating the academic-turf and organizing traffic. Definitions proliferated and were planted to secure order. A turf and a "discipline" was born.

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[233] Merkle, this Forum.

[234] Guzzini, S. (2013). The Ends of International Relations Theory: Stages of Reflexivity and Modes of Theorizing. *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3): 521–541.

[235] Weber, C. (2015). Why Is There No Queer International Theory? *European Journal of International Relations* 21(1): 27–51; Wight, M. (1960). Why Is There No International Theory? *International relations* 2(1): 35–48.

The IR terrain was contested. A variety of contenders challenged the established "realist," "geopolitical," "mainstream" order. They wanted to impose their own alternatives and so change the signposts regulating the turf by doing concept work and redrawing the topology of the IR terrain. Radical contestations came from scholars, who for various reasons, began contesting not only the precise location or the inscriptions on definitional signposts of the discipline, but turned them into objects of study. IR scholars working in International Political Economy, Feminism/Gender studies, Constructivism/Post-structuralism or Ethics/Political Theory etc. were meandering through their field extracting knowledge about the definitional signposts of the discipline and their politics. At the outset, such critical scholars were few and they focussed on conventional IR themes. Christine Sylvester, for instance, "repainted the canvas of IR" revisiting the grand debates of the discipline.[236] Cynthia Weber revisited the understanding of states and intervention in international relations.[237] Both were dismissed as overly abstract and wanting an "empirical research programme."[238]

Drawing inspiration from ethnography was a common response from critical scholars turning their attention to "practices."[239] Raising novel questions in unaccustomed but empirical ways, they were moving the signposting of turf boundaries and diverting the directions within it. Their "empirical" arguments were intelligible to the "mainstream." IR was leaking and fragmenting. Cosy campfires, where friendly groups discussed ideas, turned into closed "camps" whose members could no longer communicate across the thick layers of electrically charged epistemic, ontological and methodological layers of barbwire.[240] Drawing the history of great unresolved debates or mapping the mess meta-theoretically helped visualize the divisions and disarray.[241]

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[236] Sylvester, C. (1994). *Feminist Theory and International Relations in a Postmodern Era.* Cambridge University Press.

[237] Weber, C. (1995). *Simulating Sovereignty: Intervention, the State, and Symbolic Exchange.* Cambridge University Press.

[238] Keohane, R. O. (1989). International Relations Theory: Contributions of a Feminist Standpoint. *Millenium: Journal of International Studies* 18(2): 245–253.

[239] E.g., Neumann (2002).

[240] Sylvester, C. (2013). Experiencing the End of International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations* 19(3): 609–626.

[241] Wæver, O. (1996). The Rise and Fall of the Interparadigm Debate. In: Smith S, Booth K and Zalewski M (eds). *Theorizing International Relations*, pp.149–185; Carlsnaes,

For defenders of tradition, gatekeeping the field and policing it within, this confirmed the need to defend “the core.” The rise of right-wing populism added further impetus and urgency to this defensive move.[242] Critical scholarship in IR and ISS more broadly was charged by many – including self-conscious, concerned critical scholars – with having relativized “expert,” “scientific” knowledge and thereby contributing to delegitimizing and weakening it.

Through these contestations, the battle cry “define your terms” became ever more central for summoning the ISS disciplines to unity. The cry was rejected by many including the nascent subfield of International Political Economy. The world had changed, as Strange put it, as she resisted the “Procrustean bed” of established theories and definitions that landed scholarship in them.[243] Strange was concerned with the growing centrality of finance, companies and markets posing problems that the IR and economics disciplinary definitions obscured. As she and other critical, feminist, and post-structuralist scholars gained positions and influence, the effectiveness of the call to define terms weakened. These scholars had no intention of backtracking and giving up their newly gained space in the ISS terrain by forgetting their achievements and insights, including their rejection of restrictive definitions. Instead, they challenged disciplinary boundaries more forcefully than ever and actively subverted the policing efforts, and enthusiastically penetrated new theoretical and contextual landscapes.

In this context, Ethnography became a promised land for various and contradictory reasons. At one end of the spectrum, empirically inclined IR scholars venturing there, imagined Ethnography as a place where description (Geertzian, Orfordian and beyond) could regain its space in concept work. Ethnography indeed opened up for tending to the “superstructures.”[244] In these surfaces, materiality, visualities, dress codes, colours, embodiment, race, gender, indigeneity … “life” could be given its dues also in IR.[245] More than

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W. (2001). Foreign Policy. In: Simmons B, Carlsnaes W and Risse T (eds) *Handbook of International Relations*. Sage, pp. 331–349.

[242] Aradau, C., and Huysmans, J. (2019). Assembling Credibility: Knowledge, Method and Critique in Times of “Post-truth.” *Security Dialogue* 50(1): 40–58; Jahn, B. (2021). Critical Theory in Crisis? A Reconsideration. *European Journal of International Relations* 27(4): 1274–1299.

[243] Strange, S. (1994). Wake Up Krasner! The World Has Changed. *Review of International Political Economy* 1(2): 209–219.

[244] Weißenfels, this Forum.

[245] Guillaume, X., and Huysmans, J. (2019). The Concept of “The Everyday”: Ephemeral Politics and the Abundance of Life. *Cooperation and Conflict* 54(2): 278–296; Leander A (2011) The Promises, Problems and Potentials of a Bourdieu Inspired Approach to International Relations. *International Political Sociology* 5(3): 294–313.

dues, they became dominant at the other end of the spectrum, as theoretically inclined IR scholars imagined Ethnography as a place where a wild conceptual landscape could grow. The ethnographic interest in flattening knowledge hierarchies and reversing the gaze made its way into IR. The observers and their categories were viewed from the vantage point of the observed.[246] Established strictures and concepts could be queered.[247] "Transversal" lines and movements across them could be cultivated and followed.[248]

To many IR scholars, Ethnography appeared as *the* location for engaging the much required fundamental rethinking of the own discipline and its conceptual strictures. This took scholars down risky, unbeaten paths that could only remain open by constantly imagining ways around the innumerable obstacles posed by established scholarly, institutional and funding practices. Disciplinary definitions played a central role. Definitions of the international, the global, the modern, the state, the accountable, the legitimate, the powerful, the just etc., stymied conceptual growth and numbed contextual sensitivity. Scholars who found it necessary to abide by the "Define your terms young wo(man)" battle cry turned a deaf ear to the sounds of the strange worlds of wondrous animals – including lab-rats, cuttlefish and wolfdogs[249] – populating Ethnography. Probing how disciplinary definitions had become anchored in the landscape and *Qui Bono* – who/*what* benefits – became common pursuits for IR refugees in Ethnography.[250] Their inquiries showed the textures and contours of the definitions that were blocking the way for the curious and politically engaged and thus also the possible points of passage and necessary detours.

After venturing into the promised land of Ethnography, IR scholars thus found themselves destabilizing not only the definitions that functioned as signposts in their home terrain, but the very understanding of what work the definitions were doing. Definitions were hindering rather than helping research. Instead of opening a research journey, positing "definitions" was now the endpoint of the many inquires that strived to understand how they were stabilized and performative. IR's battle cry, "define your terms" was jarring with the "go discover your terms" that guided scholars in Ethnography. This jarring caused confusion and occasionally irreparable damage. Many scholars were following the lure of Ethnography *and* were trying to, or had to abide by IR disciplinary rules. They were stuck with the irresolvable contradiction of having to define their terms before setting out on their journey (as IR scholars) and of finding definitions only at the end of their journey (as ethnographers). The difficulty of negotiating this contradiction infused a research environment sprinkled with befuddled and abandoned projects. Very unfortunately, scholars who confronted the irresolvable contradictions, negotiated its tensions, or dissolved them, found Ethnography rather less hospitable and welcoming than the promised land of their imagination as confirmed by several of contributors to this forum.

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[246] Leander, A. (2016). Ethnographic Contributions to Method Development: "Strong Objectivity" in Security Studies. *International Studies Perspectives* 17(4): 462–475.

[247] Streinzer & Davey, this Forum.

[248] E.g., Monsees, L., Liebetrau, T., Austin, J. L., et al. (2023). Transversal Politics of Big Tech. *International Political Sociology* 17(1).

[249] Eggeling, this Forum.

[250] Kušić, this Forum.

Collaborations and Alliances in the Ethnographic Archipelago

IR scholars like ISS scholars in general, seeking to escape the conventional repercussions of disciplining definitions in their homes territories by fleeing to Ethnography, found themselves in a situation familiar to all those reaching their imagined promised land. While context did flow and concepts could grow in Ethnography, this land had its own strictures and regulations. After all, Ethnography was also an academic turf. Not all of it was critically inclined in the sense imagined by the ISS refugees. Its disciplining signposts were not definitions of core terms, however. Instead, fetishes of fieldwork were ordering this land. Strife over these fetishes was widespread. The inhabitants of Ethnography were deeply divided into groups each of which worshipped a specific fieldwork fetish and had constructed a community around it. As ISS scholars entered Ethnography, they therefore found themselves in a vast archipelago of strictly guarded islands each of which perpetuated a distinct fieldwork cult. Mirroring the relations of ISS scholars to their respective fields, some critical Ethnography inhabitants were clamouring to tear down the fetish order delimiting their field altogether and called for an anthropology beyond ethnography to open up thinking space.[251] They welcomed the newcomers as potential collaborators and allies.

However, most natives of Ethnography were anything but welcoming as they jealously guarded the powers of their fetishes over scarce academic turf. All of this made navigating the terrain of Ethnography complicated. ISS scholars who persisted found themselves collaborating and allying with the inhabitants of the islands closest to their critical inclinations in the Ethnographic Archipelago. Which islands and how they collaborated depended on the reasons ISS scholars had to migrate to Ethnography. That said, however multifaceted and varied, these collaborations and alliances reinforced the parts of the Ethnographic Archipelago that favoured fieldwork fetishes amenable to destabilize the disciplining force of disciplines.

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[251] Ingold, T. (2008). Anthropology Is Not Ethnography. *Proceedings of the British Academy:* 69–92; Ingold, T. (2014). That's Enough about Ethnography! *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4(1): 383–395.

ISS scholars might have been better prepared to strategically engage the Ethnography Archipelago they were fleeing to had they tended more carefully and comprehensively to its politics before entering the space. Doing so would immediately have made clear that in Ethnography, fieldwork was the disciplining force. Questions about how long one needed to spend with "the tribe," how one should engage with it, what kind of communication about it was permissible and what the role of the "fieldworker" should be in all of this, were the staple of Ethnography politics.[252] Fetishes of fieldwork had come to represent the "archetypical," differing and divisive answers.[253] The time when ethnography was equated with living with a tribe for a specific length of time – "at least 18 months" – and writing a book along the lines of Malinowski's account of his time with the Argonauts in the Western Pacific, was under serious challenge. Ethnography's inhabitants had become interested in tribes that did not live in stable communities overtime, but moved around and morphed: diplomats, bankers, security professionals, migrants, cyber-nomads etc. To understand them, fieldwork had become "multi-sited."[254] Some of Ethnography's denizens also wanted a say about tribes such as intelligence services, military companies or the ICRC that severely restricted the access of foreigners.[255] Therefore, fieldwork took other forms than immersion in a tribe. "Public venues," "shadowing," "events," as well as access through cultural expressions, including theatre, literature, or music were accepted avenues to fieldwork.[256] Other inhabitants of Ethnography made historical archives their entry into "the field."[257] An articulate group of Ethnography dissidents took interest in the theoretical and conceptual fields; "writing culture" and theory as it were.[258] Turning the field of ethnography itself into a field to be observed and critically probed was close at hand.[259]

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[252] Gupta, A., and Ferguson, J. (1997). "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology. In: *Anthropological Locations*. University of California Press, pp.1–46.

[253] Merkle, this Forum.

[254] Marcus, G. E. (1995) Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.

[255] Billaud, J., and Cowan, J. K. (2020). The Bureaucratisation of Utopia: Ethics, Affects and Subjectivities in International Governance Processes. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 28(1): 6–16.

[256] Czarniawska, B. (2018). Fieldwork Techniques for Our Times: Shadowing. *Qualitative Methodologies in Organization Studies*. Springer, pp. 53–74.

[257] Stoler 2010; Stoler, A. L. (2022). Archiving Praxis: For Palestine and Beyond. *Critical Inquiry* 48(3): 570–593.

This list does not exhaust the steadily expanding range of fetishes of fieldwork or their contestation, obviously. It is intended as a pointer to the "fractal processes"[260] at work in the Ehnographic Archipelago that ISS scholars were entering into and intensifying. However, nothing galvanizes unity as an outside intruder. As they sought entry, ISS scholars often faced a high back-to-basics-threshold for admittance of "18 months of fieldwork" minimum that no longer mattered for Ethnography citizens. Different standards applied for insiders and outsiders. The effect on some ISS refugees was the intended intimidation and retreat from Ethnography to the country of origin or, more likely, to the liminal no man's land marked by signposts such as "quasi-ethnography" or "description" or "practices." Other ISS newcomers persisted, penetrating the archipelago more deeply, seeking firm ground on selected islands. ISS scholars managed to establish firm connections or even carve out a terrain for themselves on those islands in the ethnographic archipelago where they had a real chance of forging alliances and collaborations with the natives. The precise nature of these varied as much as the scholars' reasons for escaping the disciplining of definitions in their homelands. To gain a sense of the spectrum, consider first the landscape islands united around "concept work" dedicated to the "inequities that concepts condone, inscribe, and inhabit" and to the "fuzzy boundaries," "excess" and "spaces between" concepts to encourage a "mobile thought" making "thinking otherwise" but also "inhabiting concepts differently" an option.[261] Joining forces with such conceptual endeavours in Ethnography opened the way to a range of archipelago islands, including e.g., the "Q*ARX Collective" of anthropologists exploring the queer Marxian sensibilities from within the Ethnography field.[262] At the other end of the archipelago, scholars deeply cognizant of the perils of preconceived (theoretical, conceptual) critiques moved close to "parasitic" approaches to critique where the co-production of critique must necessarily and always start from the contextual and empirical.[263] Followed to its limits, such approaches leads to the "Mestiza" "Borderlands" of Anzaldúa,[264] where speaking with the oppressed translating their sensorium linguistic and beyond, but also leaving space for the equivocation of the non-translatable is the aim of scholarship.[265] However, few ISS scholars follow Anzaldúa's in accepting the consequences of this stance that necessarily takes concept work beyond the limits of the academic and so out and away from the wider realm of the scholarly profession. Instead, they prefer safer descriptions "from below" that are more viable academically and therefore more amenable to alliances and collaborations with non-researchers who can be brought into Ethnography and academia more widely. The grounded accounts of the "environmental racism" and "racist necropolitics" written with the "Quilomban women" of Ilha de Maré[266] emerge through such collaborations and serve as a firm basis for claiming space in Ethnography.

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[258] Clifford, J., and Marcus, G. E. (1986). *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press.

[259] E.g., Fabian, J. (1983). *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object.* Columbia University Press.

[260] Abbott, A. (2004). *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences.* W.W. Norton and Company.

[261] Stoler, A. L. (2016). *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times.* Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 8–9.

[262] Streinzer and Davey, this Forum.

The islands on which IR refugees establish themselves to probe "definitions" through "concept work" span a vast range of the Ethnography Archipelago. However, that range is also limited. It includes only islands where the fieldwork fetishes favour such *critical* work and the native Ethnography tribes are (therefore) open to alliances with the arriving ISS scholars. One of the contributors to this forum optimistically assumes criticality to be inherent in the "different starting points to ethnography."[267] However, precisely because it is not, the alliances ISS scholars make are necessarily selective, even if they connect to Ethnography's "criticality" in all its variations. The ISS refugees form alliances with Ethnography islanders ranging from those doing fieldwork in the spirit of stern "anti-politics" unveiling injustice to those involved in more shamanic "alter politics" of calling forth alternatives, openings.[268]

In a decentred and diffuse manner, the alliances between ISS and locals bolster the space of criticality broadly speaking in Ethnography. The connections they establish between Ethnography and ISS also weaken the disciplining efforts of less (or anti-) critically orientated Ethnography scholars, who try to limit this territorial expansion of critical scholarship in their space.

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[263] Austin, J. L. (2019). A Parasitic Critique for International Relations. *International Political Sociology* 13(2): 215–231.

[264] Anzaldúa, G. (1999). Borderlands/la frontera.

[265] E.g., De la Cadena, M. (2015). *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds.* Duke University Press.

[266] Kocks and Anderl, this Forum.

[267] Kušić, this Forum.

[268] Hage, G. (2015). *Alter-Politics. Critical Anthropology and the Radical Imagination.* Melbourne Univeristy Press.

For the same reason, these criss-crossing critical routes also sap the efforts of those IR refugees, who become self-proclaimed order-makers mimicking the disciplining impetus that prompted their exodus from ISS in the first place – only now in the Ethnography context, on Ethnography terms. Is the motley crew of ISS refugees doing ethnography in the right way? Are they ethnographic enough and in the right way? Are the alliances they conclude the desirable ones? Should their collaborations take different forms? etc. This absence of effective border-guarding and self-policing leaves ISS scholars allying with criticality in Ethnography diffusely and broadly.

The ramifications of these critical inroads redraw the scholarly topography of Ethnography. It skews it towards variations of "criticality" by granting them status as connection points and weight through recognition by scholars beyond Ethnography proper. The ISS arrival in clear plays into "the politics of location" in Ethnography by reshuffling the weight of the fieldwork fetishes ordering the field.[269] In other words, it destabilizes the relations among the islands and their inhabitants in the archipelago. More than this, the ISS refugees appropriate fieldwork fetishes. They make the references, experience and expertise defining of Ethnography their own, sometimes taking it out of context and anchoring it in their own disciplinary debates and turfs. In the process, new islands are sometimes formed and become connected to the Ethnographic Archipelago as signalled, e.g., by qualifiers such as "legal," "organizational," "economic" or "visual" added to "ethnography." This is more than a reshuffling of relations within. It is a shift of the boundaries delimiting it. It is also a reshuffling of the texture of these boundaries. They become more porous as the spell of the central, conventional, fieldwork fetishes diminishes at the margins and innovative forms of critical ethnography take root and flourish.

Doubly Destabilizing Effects of Destabilizing Definitions

In sum, the move of critical International Social Science scholars to the promised land of Ethnography (or more accurately their imagined version of it) is doubly destabilizing. It unsettles conventional ISS disciplines by diminishing the directive, ordering power of its definitions as illustrated above with reference to International Relations specifically. It also upsets ethnography by tilting its topography towards criticality and towards a very specific search for "definitions." As the contributions to this forum illustrate, such critical destabilizations of established structures are uncomfortable, uncertain potential openings that allow for the development of "genuinely transformative" knowledge about how to "live and love in the present."[270] Ironically, one of the main obstacles to the realization of this potential come from the lasting traces and hauntings deeply inscribed in the infrastructures of the disciplines.

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[269] Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

Even for critical ISS scholars inspired by Ethnography, it is often difficult to realize, articulate and gain acceptance in their homelands for the simple reason that definitions are the end – *not* the beginning – of research for them. They are doing ethnography to advance the concept work fundamental to criticality. Analogously, and for similar reasons, even the most critical ethnography scholars find it difficult to emancipate themselves from the ghosts of conventional fieldwork of "at least 18 months in the field" and articulate, anchor and advance broader ethnographic approaches and aims. The reflexivity required for scholars from ISS and Ethnography alike to relativize the grip of the respective research traditions is daunting. The generative, pre-cognitive and deeply embodied *habitus* of any well-trained researcher rebels against such fundamental breaks with the own tradition. Yet, as the contributions to this forum illustrate, destabilization is possible. Collectively, the contributors widen the openings for criticality in ISS and in Ethnography as well as in the many spaces between them and along the critical routes connecting them. Widening these openings further is one of the collective endeavours ahead.

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[270] Respectively Kocks and Anderl, and Streinzer and Davey, this Forum.