Conducting Sensitive Research as an Alien Ethnographer in the United States

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Abstract

As a French PhD student, my work focuses on democratic deficits in the United States and explores the evolution of the American Left since 2001. Adopting methodological tools provided by ethnography, I am investigating how activist groups are using civil disobedience and non-violent direct action under the current legal, judicial, and police constraints specific to the post-9/11 era. My research is contingent on structural shifts occurring on the macro-political level, such as changes in the federal government. But as the incident related above demonstrates, my own status as a foreign ethnographer is also a factor, since I can neither escape nor disentangle myself from my identity. The aim of this reflexive article is to discuss how, within a broader context of state repression and surveillance, my “double condition of alien-age” (alien as a non-citizen and alien as an insider/outsider researcher amongst activist groups), is affecting not only how I am conducting my fieldwork, but is also shaping my object of study.

Keywords: American Left, Civil Disobedience, Direct Action, Involved Anthropology, Reflexive Ethnography, Sensitive Research

1 On November 10, 2016, surrounded by anti-Trump protesters who had taken to the streets in response to the outcome of the Presidential election, I experienced a moment of disconnect and self-awareness directly related to my status as a foreign national conducting fieldwork in the United States: While overcome by the wide range of emotions on display (my own included) and by a general sense of urgency, I stopped in my tracks, suddenly feeling illegitimate to join in with those in the crowd chanting “Not My President.” The statement was, after all, true on a literal level, since I do not hold US citizenship. But I was mostly uncomfortable with my position and obsessed with finding my “right” place as a researcher engaged in participatory observation in an unpermitted protest, having not yet decided on set boundaries for my involvement in the current wave of mobilization.

2 As further developed below using examples from the ongoing fieldwork I started in the fall of 2016, my methodology has been directly conditioned by what it means to
be conducting sensitive research amongst activist groups. But even though my work is restricted by my non-resident status, my position as a French researcher does not necessarily have a negative impact on my fieldwork. My project benefits from the fact that I am coming from a country and an institution with high soft-power ranking. It is also advantaged by subjective factors such as past life experiences, and by objective determinants on which I have no control (such as age, race, and gender). On the other hand, even though I only focus on non-violent groups, my work revolves around the new mobilization constraints that derive from the institutionalization of counterterrorist policies and the evolution of protest policing. This requires me to take certain measures to protect myself and has direct practical consequences on how I can carry on my research as an alien under the current political climate, given that my immigration status not only puts me in a precarious position, but might also put others at risk.

**An Ad hoc Methodology for Sensitive Fieldwork**

Given that conducting precarious fieldwork does not directly imply encountering physical violence or finding oneself in a dangerous position (Copans), scholars have attempted to better define sensitive research over the past few decades (Dickson-Swift et al.). Most emphasize the consequences research can have for both investigators and investigated, as well as the ethical dilemmas and methodological problems that arise from “intimate, discreditable or incriminating” topics (Lee and Renzetti ix). For researchers, danger is primarily subjective (Ayimpam and Bouju par. 15), as they strive to cross borders (be they emotional, physical, social, or even legal) in their attempt to explore cultural or political phenomena. Furthermore, as Daniel Bizeul showed, the level of apparent adversity is vastly contingent on who the researchers are, on their life trajectory, and on moral as well as practical resources.

Although qualitative methods seem better adapted when addressing contentious issues, they entail developing and maintaining relationships that cannot be devoid of emotional commitments from both parties involved. Deciding on the level of engagement with my fieldwork has been an ongoing process that has been shaped by my access to activist groups. I am highly aware that my subject is sensitive, given the many historical precedents—American government institutions have regularly adopted repressive measures that directly or indirectly infringe upon the right to dissent, like the **Alien and Sedition Acts** of 1798, the **Palmer Raids** of 1920, the **Smith Act** of 1940, or **COINTELPRO** in the 1970s (Gereben Schaefer).

Over the course of the 1970s, the American Left mostly forsook the use of violence against people and targeted property through guerilla tactics such as bombings, arsons, and robberies (Falciola). This de-escalation led to a wider containment and expansive condemnation of political violence over the following decades, and to the overall pacification of the Left. The main exceptions were radical environmentalist groups such as the **Earth Liberation Front** that were still active in the mid-2000s,
but were targeted with legal action by the government in what activists named the “Green Scare” (Potter 61).

6 When I started my fieldwork in 2016, however, the antifascist movement was on the rise in the United States, and has since expanded. It was an interesting development to observe, but I soon understood that I had to restrict my research to groups committed to non-violence: Following those who embrace a diversity of tactics would put me at personal risk with the authorities, and my personal aversion to physical confrontation further limited what I could observe.

7 Thus, I decided to abandon the “radical” component of my research and to focus instead on less contentious groups, on non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, which, I would argue, nevertheless belong to a radical repertoire when unpermitted and un-negotiated. Examples of such actions include disrupting public events, dropping banners, marching with or against traffic (“taking the street”) or attempting to shut down businesses or government and public administrations.

8 Ethnography and participant observation appeared to be the most relevant methodology to understand how activist groups currently employ direct action. I figured that placing myself within the action would give me an insight I would not otherwise be privy to if I only relied on interviews. But because the boundaries between activism and social sciences can be hazy, I have developed a methodology that is informed by my own ethics and that aims to find the right distance from my informants while protecting everyone involved in my research. Along with Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who advocates a “Militant Anthropology,” I believe that seeking any kind of scientific objectivity over the personal and political entanglements of my research would be impossible. Participant observation does not conflict with my role if I construct it the way Didier Fassin conceives of “involved anthropology” (anthropologie impliquée 58), which implies combining immersive fieldwork and, at a later stage, critical analysis.

9 First and foremost, my personal involvement is a way to obtain data. Participant observation allows me to gather information that pertains to emotions and subjectivity, which are necessary to explain activists’ strategies and behavior. This chosen level of engagement also shows my informants that I am someone to be trusted as I too am exposed to many of the same risks and take part in the burden of organizing. However, this does not mean that I am a candid activist as I can never completely part from my identity as a researcher.

10 As French universities do not have Institutional Review Boards (IRB), and because I cannot rely on any institutional precedent that I know of in French academia, I had to come up with ad hoc solutions to match theory and practice and assuage my ethical concerns over finding and keeping the “right” distance, remaining independent, protecting my sources, and avoiding, as best as I can, influencing events as they are unfolding. These considerations have an effect on my level of participation.
amongst the groups I study. For example, I purposely go beyond a strategy of detached observation, which would preclude my inclusion in more covert actions that often require joining affinity groups (which are small, decentralized and flexible groups formed around a shared interest or common goal to devise and perform direct actions). I have also chosen to announce who I am and what I do, and to conduct my research openly. It is an ethical stance and a matter of respect: I do not want to betray anyone’s trust just to obtain insider information. In the past year spent in the field, I have never experienced instances where my decision to disclose my identity prevented me from gaining access to any group. The only exception I make is during actions when fully introducing myself to random strangers might put me at risk, given that I am unable to make out who, in a crowd, is an undercover police officer.

11 As Christophe Broqua explained in his description of the methodology he employed for his ethnography of Act Up Paris in the 1990s, just because a group consents to the presence of a researcher does not mean that every member is aware of that alien presence. Much as he did, I always announce myself and seek approval from those I perceive as the leaders when I attend the meeting of a group I am unknown to. I will also always try to mention who I am in one-on-one conversations or during smaller social gatherings, which sometimes leads me to awkwardly “come-out” in the middle of a conversation. However, keeping track over time of whom I have or have not disclosed my identity to has become challenging. As Broqua describes, this means that I can never be quite sure of how others perceive me (par. 28–33). In order to overcome this problem, I have come to rely on the way I gather and protect my data, which I will detail further down.

12 One of the additional rules I have given myself to keep some distance is to speak as little as possible during general meetings, and to never be the one inciting an action. I take notes openly, but I do not take pictures or record anything. I also abstain from voting on issues that are contentious and I tend to follow the general consensus on the floor when decisions are made. This posture can be delicate at times, especially during smaller meetings when it is expected that every member of the group will give some input —direct action, after all, is most usual in groups with an informal, horizontal structure that rely on consensus-based decision-making, which implies the participation of every person involved. With time I have come to speak out more as I realized that my silence was becoming problematic and it was hard to justify my presence in the room as an active member when meetings are based on consensus-making. This is why I have slowly started to vote or add my voice to support propositions when they are uncontested; I often recuse myself from voting on heavily-debated issues, on the ground that as a non-permanent resident, I do not share everyone’s stakes and therefore do not feel legitimated to take a stand on the subject at hand. However, when I must express my opinion on contentious issues, I strive to do so honestly, but as mildly as possible in order not to antagonize anyone. Later I
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devote a large amount of time to recording my dilemma in the reflexive part of my
ethnographic notebook.

The Ethnographer as an Insider/Outsider: An Inescapable Condition
both at Home and Abroad

13 I have come to rely on my reflexive notes in order to better understand my role as
an “objective instrument of data production” and to recognize that “personal in-
volution is more than dangerous bias—and it is the condition under which people
come to know each other and to admit others into their lives” (Oakley 58). This
decision is strongly informed by my past readings of feminist scholarship and by the
bare fact that I am a woman, which makes me particularly receptive to critiques of
the inherent male-centeredness of positivism and eager to develop non-hierarchical
relationships with my informants (cf. Celis et al.). I am aware that knowledge pro-
duction cannot be devoid of power imbalances and I am concerned with issues of
authorship and representation (Marcus and Fisher). It is therefore important for me
to recognize that my knowledge is situated (cf. Haraway), and to conceive of field-
work as a collaboration with the groups I have become part of, especially when my
sheer presence might put them at risk, as I will explain below.

14 This immediately raises the question of where I situate my research within the field
of French social science as it is the community to which I am answerable and where
I am pledged to submit my work. Given my background in American Studies, I am
strongly attached and indebted to the “tension between discipline and interdiscipli-
narity” inherent to American Studies (Lunden 8). Because I am so accustomed to
the practice of interdisciplinarity, I have come to take it for granted instead of using
it as an epistemological resource. However, upon writing a doctoral research pro-
posal, I sensed that my project would require theoretical and methodological re-
sources that American Studies, as practiced in French humanities departments, had
not brought me: namely, the tools of political sociology and political theory.

15 To redress this issue, and even though this discipline is much less open to cultural
approaches, I have chosen to enroll in a degree in political science, where the bound-
aries between different theoretical frameworks are much stronger and where the
methodological constraints feel tighter than in American Studies. My doctoral school
has a strong structuralist tradition that is quite remote from the theoretical perspec-
tive I have chosen for my research—i.e. strategic interactionism as developed by
current American social movement studies (see Jasper, “Playing” 22–27; Jasper
“From Political”). My doctoral school is also quite focused on either French topics
or francophone countries and there is no faculty member whose work focuses on
American politics. This situation puts me in a peculiar place in my home institution
where, similar to what I experience in the field, I can feel like an alien at times.
When in the United States, I find myself in a “betwixt-and-between position” with a “fluid status that does not lead to either inclusion or exclusion” (Ergun and Erdemir 34) and where my identity is always being negotiated with my informants. The depth and quality of the relationships I have developed with them (and with some more than with others), which conditions my access to the field, has benefited from subjective factors over which I have no control as they result from my personal life experience.

In the past decade, I have been mostly living abroad in anglophone countries (the United States included), so that, when engaging in fieldwork, I do not experience (or re-experience) any of the incongruities and frustration one encounters when moving to a foreign location. Nor do I have to adapt myself to new social settings as I have a history in the country along with a personal network of friends. This is quite an advantage as I do not have to undergo the identity shift one goes through when speaking a different language (Koven 61–85). In other words, I do not need to find who I am when I speak English in order to conduct my research, because I have known the language for over ten years and am grounded in it. I believe that this is a tremendous help. It not only saves time, but it also facilitates my integration into groups as it makes me sound and seem more like a native.

My project also benefits from other factors that I have no command over. One comes directly from the soft power I derive from both my nationality and my home institution. Living in a liberal American city, strangers regularly try out their French on me upon meeting for the first time, or associate me with whichever positive view they have of my country and of its political culture. I always strategically deploy (or withhold) any information related with my university. For instance, being affiliated with a doctoral school that has the word “Sorbonne” in its title also opens up a lot of doors: Progressives or leftists often (positively) mention the Mai 1968 student protests while people in more institutional settings or in position of power (American academics, Customs and Border Protection officers) seem to give me more consideration when I mention it.

Some other personal characteristics bring me many advantages and help me get ahead in my research. I am a young-looking, educated, single, white, able-bodied, cis-woman. My profile fits most standards of desirability, and most importantly it often matches the demographics of the activists I interact with. This positively impacts my research as long as I stay with groups where I do not look too much like an outsider. I understood that when I went to a meeting for immigrants’ rights led by people of color and realized that my race and researcher status would make it complicated for me to become an insider without someone brokering me in. This group ended up not fitting with my criteria for research (they employ a diversity of tactics that are incompatible with the precepts of non-violence), but the fact that I did not have to find a way to bypass the problem of entry and face my own prejudice is a matter of pure chance: I still come to enjoy the privileges brought by my age,
race, and gender. Still, my status as a “non-permanent resident alien” (or in other words, a lawfully admitted alien who is not a lawful permanent resident in the United States, as defined by the Immigration Act of 1990) puts me in a situation of vulnerability that has a direct impact on how I carry out fieldwork.

**The Contingencies of Sensitive Research as a Foreign National**

Conducting research in a foreign country is first and foremost a matter of gaining and maintaining access to the field. My affiliation with the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne has allowed me to travel back and forth relatively easily as a visiting scholar, and my French citizenship has undoubtedly been an advantage in obtaining the visas I needed and to cross the border without any incident. However, as non-citizens do not partake of all the rights of citizens under the US Constitution, and because the Supreme Court’s jurisprudence on this matter is “unsettled” (Nelson Moore 815), I have to take some precautions in order to remain admissible in the United States. I therefore cannot run the risk of getting arrested, even on charges that would probably be dismissed (such as disorderly conduct), which de facto restricts my involvement in direct action and sets limits to the feasibility of my participant observation.

Moreover the enactment of the USA PATRIOT Act in 2001 signaled that aliens (whether inside or outside the United States) might not have First Amendment guarantees of free speech and freedom of assembly, and can be investigated solely on the basis of their activities (Cole 966). Section 802 broadly expanded the definition of “terrorism” to include “domestic” acts of political violence, while the amendments to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) passed in 2001 and 2008 became the legal basis of the mass surveillance programs uncovered by Edward Snowden in 2014. FISA set alienage-based monitoring standards (Chhabra) and allowed government agencies to justify the warrantless collection of bulk metadata from US nationals in contact with non-US citizens. Telecommunication surveillance includes wiretapping phones, accessing voicemail, intercepting emails and text messages, and wiretapping VoIP calls (such as Skype).

Meanwhile, the judiciarization of research is a growing challenge—as the prosecution of Rik Scarce and the Boston College Belfast Project[1] can attest. In France, public prosecutors can ask and have asked scholars to disclose their sources and to release their notebooks and hard drives. When that happens, academic institutions cannot shield social scientists and their work from being subpoenaed. Nor do they offer any kind of legal aid. This means that whereas journalists benefit from reporters’ privilege, researchers cannot fully guarantee that their informants will remain anonymous and be fully protected from prosecution (Atlani-Duault and Dufoix par. 66). An intelligence act was passed in France on July 24, 2015 (Loi relative au rensei-
It aimed at regulating wiretaps and intelligence activities, but its broad encompassing definition of the motives that can justify extrajudicial surveillance has further exacerbated the issue.

In order to circumvent these legal and (potentially) judicial constraints, and because protecting those I interact with is of the utmost importance, I have taken some measures to preserve myself and not harm anyone around me. This has impacted my research, the way I conduct it, and even the way I behave—as I strive to be unnoticeable in public actions, I often put on a mask and try to look uninterested and uninteresting in the events that are unfolding.

Surveillance technologies (e.g. PRISM, the United States National Security Agency’s program that collects internet communications through direct access to internet service providers’ servers, or fusion centers, which promote intelligence sharing among federal agencies) characteristic of the post-9/11 period, as well as the legacy of the US government’s infiltration and monitoring of activist groups, have led me to take specific measures to protect my research and my informants against bulk surveillance. I have devised a protocol for digital security that involves encrypting all my devices, research files, Internet traffic (through Tor and VPNs), and covert conversations through the use of Signal or ProtonMail. When privy to more sensitive information during closed meetings, I do not take notes that would allow someone to be identified. During actions, I abstain from texting in case there are any Stingray phone trackers in the area that would catch the content or metadata of my messages. I also stay clear of the giant surveillance apparatus that is social media even if not having a Facebook or Twitter account means that I have less access to insider information. Most groups have public profiles I can read without having to connect to any platform, which also removes the ethical dilemma of collecting digital data without a group’s consent since it is openly available and becomes public speech. Finally, I try to control what kind of information is available about me online and seek to disclose as little as I can, which makes me even refrain from signing online petitions.

I know that my protocol is far from perfect. It is most likely vulnerable and I will probably never know if it is effective, but I have come to adopt it after spending a great amount of time looking for solutions. As I quickly understood from discussing this issue with my colleagues at the university, it is not yet customary for French researchers to take such measures, and there is no IRB to force us to protect our data. Because I do not own a degree in computer engineering, I have to rely on other sources to advise me on how to stay secure and keep up to date with the advances in technology. I mostly comply with what the Electronic Frontier Foundation recommends, but I still cannot have a critical perspective on what I read in this domain, which poses a limit to how much I can protect my work.

Personal safety also directs how I conduct fieldwork. Erving Goffman has described how individuals will change their behavior once they know they are under surveillance. I have experienced that process and come to adjust both my appearance and
conduct in public settings in order to remain safe. Another reason I never speak in general meetings or try to stay silent in public is because I do not want to draw attention to myself in a space where law enforcement officers might be present. My accent would give me away as a non-native speaker and might lead me to be singled out. During peaceful protests, I have on several occasions witnessed the police targeting minorities as well as those who appear to be vulnerable and whose arrest would emotionally impact the group and break down the demonstration. This why I also refrain from speaking and chanting when I am at an action.

Nowadays, as we live in an era of liquid surveillance when the smallest details of our lives are monitored moment-by-moment through social media (Bauman and Lyon), protests are livestreamed (and therefore possibly monitored by the police), and most demonstrators take photographs without asking permission. I have had to devise ways to stay away from the pictures, as having my face in the press or online might lead me to be identified by law-enforcement authorities and by groups that belong to the alt-right. These new players have become threats to left-wing protesters by counter-demonstrating and trying to incite violence. They have also adopted tactics similar to those of the antifa by recording events in order to research and broadcast private or identifiable information (a practice known as doxing).

Unfortunately, I cannot always ensure that my presence will remain anonymous to the wider public and to the authorities, and I can sometimes spot myself in videos posted on YouTube or on public social media channels. It is a low risk I am willing to take and against which I have come up with various solutions: I never carry a sign (or have actively hidden behind one the few times I could not get out of holding one) so as not to stand out; I do not bring attention to myself by wearing outlandish clothes or by participating in guerilla theater; I walk away from group pictures and photo ops, and I never brand myself with badges and stickers to remain as neutral as possible. At times, I have been so successful at actively disentangling myself from protesters while not looking too much like a bystander that on several occasions I have been asked if I was a journalist. This might have meant that I had for once, if only temporarily, found the right way to fit in.

Conclusion

Engaging in participant observation in a foreign country is an exciting and transformative experience where researchers often role-play at being someone else (Berliner par. 1) and where one’s identity is continuously being negotiated. In this article, I have argued that conducting ethnography as an alien in the United States means that I face ethical, legal, and practical challenges that are specific to my status as a non-permanent resident and to the sensitive aspect of my object of study. On the micro level, these challenges are shaped (and often favored) by my past life experi-
ence and by my institutional affiliation, while on the macro level, they are conditioned by political and historical factors over which I have no command and that put me in a situation of precariousness.

I have therefore had to carefully craft an ethical stance that informs the way I carry out my research responsibly and protect those who have given me access to their organizations, some of whom now consider me a member. The ethnographers’ dilemma over the right distance to keep from their object is a source of never-ending anxiety. I have come to believe that in my current situation—where my status as an immigrant researcher puts me and others at risk—I should let go of this quandary and focus instead on being accountable to both my project and to those around me, as my informants and I are tied in a shared condition of vulnerability.

Read Audrey Célestine and Nicolas Martin-Breteau’s Response to “Conducting Sensitive Research as an Alien Ethnographer in the United States”

References


Notes

[1] As a graduate student in sociology researching radical environmentalism, Rik Scarce spent five months in jail in 1993 on a federal contempt-of-court charge after refusing to cooperate with a grand jury investigating the Earth Liberation Front. The “Belfast Project” is an oral history of the Troubles in Ireland in the late twentieth century. Former loyalist and republican paramilitaries were interviewed on the condition that their contributions would not be disclosed until after their death, and the tapes were held at Boston College. In 2011, the US Department of Justice issued sealed subpoenas to obtain access to some of the interviews. The case went up to the Supreme Court and is still ongoing.

About the Author

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Suggested Citation


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